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NORTHERN ROSES:

A YORKSHIRE STORY.

BY

MRS. ELLIS,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

THE summer throughout which Robert Gray was so fully, and often so pleasantly occupied in making ready his future home, was not marked by any other very striking changes in that quiet neighbourhood. It had been expected that the Huntleys would return with the spring to occupy again their large and somewhat desolate-looking mansion. But Lady Huntley was reported to find a lengthened residence at Nice important to her health, and Sir James was easily satisfied with a few hasty visits to England, and now and then a very cursory survey of the premises which he professed to occupy in the

near neighbourhood of Applegarth and Whinfield.

“Nobody wanted them,” old Molly said ; and perhaps the few servants remaining at the Hall were of the same opinion, for they went on in a kind of dreamy way, opening a few windows in the morning, and closing them at night, and giving themselves as little trouble in the gardens and plantations as was consistent with accounts to be rendered of the sale of fruit, and other produce. In the whole range of the premises nothing looked more deplorable than the stables. The hunters had all been sold, with the exception of two or three turned out to grass, and amongst them was a beautiful young animal, which a celebrated horse trainer had received orders to make ready for the coming winter. Nobody knew why, for Sir James was not likely to use it if at home, and as to the

family with their friends spending the winter there, that was a thing quite out of the question. The young mare, however, was placed under training, and with this exception, the affairs at the Hall remained in *statu quo*, approaching, as nearly as life could approach, to stagnation. The mossy fountains dripped upon the lawn, the peacocks screamed on the ivied walls, the jackdaws took possession of the unpeopled tower, and the dog howled for company in the untrodden yard.

People wondered the Huntleys did not take more pleasure in keeping up the place—such a fine old county place as that. “But they were nowt but new-made fowk thersel’s. What did they knaw aboot coonty places, and what belonged to real genteel dooins?”

Thus the summer glided on, bringing, perhaps, no greater change than that wrought

in the character and modes of thought of one isolated youth, whose life, up to this time, had been one of pensive musings and harmless dreams. To Robert Gray it was one of active and vigorous employment, as well as to his sister, and other relations, whose helping hands were ever at his service. To say that he was perfectly satisfied with the part which his future help-meet took in the business, was more than anyone would have ventured. Many were vexed enough to see how carelessly Bessy looked upon the preparations for her future home. But they were accustomed to be vexed with her, and bore such vexation as people bear a chronic disease. Robert alone was never heard to complain. Men seldom do complain under such circumstances; the vexation touches them too closely. And sometimes, as usual, Bessy was both thoughtful and pleasant, and would say and do what,

to those who loved her, made up for a thousand wrong sayings and misdoings. And Robert always forgave her sooner than anyone else, and seemed only to love her better each time that she was forgiven.

Happily for him, there had occurred throughout the summer nothing positively vexatious—nothing worse than her frequent visits to the Inglewoods. There had been no exciting events in the neighbourhood—no interesting strangers—in short, nobody to flirt with—not even a young Methodist preacher, for it so happened that a married man was now stationed at that post of duty.

It might be the dearth of excitement generally which had first driven Bessy so frequently to Norton Cottage. Perhaps she was beginning to tire a little even of that, when it was proposed that she should go from home,

and pay a few farewell visits amongst uncles, aunts, and cousins, some residing in York, and others in different parts of the country.

The York visit was the most interesting to Bessy, because here her wedding purchases were to be made. It was a great event to see the latest fashions, and make purchases in York. Ridiculously small as might appear the sum of money allowed for this purpose, in the eyes of a modern young lady, to Bessy it was much—so much, that it occupied no inconsiderable portion of her thoughts in planning out, so as to make it reach the extent of her wishes. The worst was, she must have a new riding-habit, and this article, submitted to the hands of a fashionable habit-maker in York, was no trifling matter.

A well-made cloth habit was, in these times an indispensable part of all respectable female equipments. Young women were often mar-

ried in habits ; and for a day's excursion, or a journey, it was the favourite costume—equally adopted by those who rode on horseback, and those who had never graced a saddle in their lives. For a rider like Bessy, it was, therefore, especially indispensable ; and a superfine blue cloth habit was procured as the first article of her personal outfit. What thoughts Bessy had of the hunting-field during the coming winter, were best known to herself. She was not to be married before early in the following spring, and she saw no reason in the world why the new habit should not do service before that time.

When Bessy returned from her cousinly visits, she found all at home, and in the surrounding neighbourhood especially, “throng,” as they called being busy, with an accumulation of work that must be done. There had been all the summer fruit to pre-

serve ; and now there would soon be the autumn fruit to gather in ; and, in addition to other preparations, an endless variety of home-made wines to conduct through the various processes of fermentation, bottling, &c. Then there was the autumn ale—strong ale to brew. And all the while both hay and harvest, in their turn, had been going on according to the old-fashioned style of providing for the great body of the workmen in the house, or about the premises. It was the custom to hire additional labourers from a distance at such times. Scotchmen would come and work at the English harvests, and return in time for their own. Besides which, there were more frequently vagrant Irish, disbanded soldiers, and a great variety of other hands, not always welcomed by the native labourers. Women, children, all spare hands turned out at such times ; and generally all

other operations were suspended for the occasion. Not so in the present instance, for chiefly on account of this important marriage, there were early risings, and late undertakings, all tending towards the same great event—the first marriage in the two families.

In the midst of all this bustle, Bessy would not unfrequently amuse herself upstairs by unfolding and examining her late purchases, and especially her habit. She had no excuse at present for bringing it further out into the light of day. Everyone was so busy, there was no one to ride with. Besides which, her father took possession of Pepper to canter about the fields, and inspect the work going on there. All the other horses on the farm were more or less engaged in carting the produce from the fields. If Bessy had gone out in her habit, she would scarcely have been

seen, so great was the urgency of business on every hand, so close the occupation of all, that none would have been at liberty to admire her.

Whether it was owing to the weight of his rider, or his own advancing years, certainly Pepper did not get about, Mr. Bell thought, with his accustomed lightness and spirit. Bessy remonstrated against her father's riding him. She was sure he was too heavy, for she also had observed that her old favourite was not quite himself. And one day she appealed to Robert on the subject, saying, with an expression of distress in her face,

"I wish you would examine my pony for me. I am afraid he has had some kind of strain. I don't like the go of his near hind leg."

Robert assured her it was nothing but old age. It did not matter much, he said. She

would never want him again. He would train the bay colt ready for her before the spring.

"But I *shall* want him again," said Bessy, pouting. "I shall want him all this winter."

"How?" asked Robert.

"Why, to see the hounds, to be sure."

"Nonsense!" said Robert. "Don't be foolish, Bessy. You are not going into the hunting-field this winter."

"Yes, but I am."

"You are not."

"We shall see. And I'm going to ride Pepper, too."

"Now, Bessy, do be reasonable. Can't you see that the poor old fellow is fairly worn out? Besides which, I am quite sure you have been growing stouter this summer. You are quite too heavy for that little cock-sparrow, even if he was not on his last legs, and it

would be downright cruelty now to ride him as you have done."

"And pray what am I to ride, then?"

"Just nothing at all. You can surely keep at home as other girls do for one winter, and that the last before you are a wife."

"But I must ride, and I will. Why, there's my new habit! Think of what it cost me. Is it to be stuffed away to get moth eaten? It's an absolute necessity that I ride—and I *will* ride, too."

"I don't think you will," said Robert, with great coolness, as he turned away, feeling perfectly satisfied in his own mind that Bessy would see the impropriety of exhibiting herself in the hunting-field before the time should come. Besides which, he did not intend to allow her to be seen there, but preferred that she should resist the temptation herself, as he never doubted but she would.

In the meantime came the shooting. And now the old Major toddled out with his gun, mounted on his white pony. He had come to live in that neighbourhood, he said, for the sake of the shooting. He described himself as a wonderful shot. But he did not make much out after all, for his hands were shaky, and his eyes saw false, so that the lad who carried his game-bag had a very light duty to perform. Still, he thought it looked like sport, and perhaps felt a little like it too, as he snuffed the autumn air, saw his pointers rushing through the stubble, and heard the firing of other guns to the right and left of him, and met other sportsmen with whom he chatted by the way. There was a little taste of early nature in all this to the old man. And, oh! if he were but young again, he thought, how he would bring down the birds, and astonish them all!

Bessy was very much in the mind to put on her habit, mount her pony, and ride about with the old gentleman; but, besides that it might look particular, his style of riding was not to her taste. Still, as he had never seen her habit—had scarcely seen her on horseback at all—for Pepper had been turned out all the summer—she did dash up to him one day like an Amazon, delighting his enchanted eyes, and drawing from him a perfect flood of delicious compliments, all ending in a sigh. Yes, all ending in a sigh, almost a groan, for he did wish, just then, that he was young again, and could ride with that splendid creature, as he had ridden once, but, oh! so long ago!

In spite of herself Bessy could not stay pottering beside the white pony and its gouty rider. Her impatience to be off was too visi-

ble, notwithstanding all his flatteries. Her cheek glowed, her eyes flashed as she tossed back her exuberant hair, and at last she darted past, looking back and laughing, and showing her white teeth, and making the old Major feel as if he could yet ride a war-horse, if he had one. Ride? Yes, to the end of the world, with that young creature by his side.

But you have no war horse, Major Inglewood, and with that young creature you have nothing in the world to do. And you have a gouty foot. You are very old, and very wicked, and you had better go home and say your prayers.

As usual with characters like Major Inglewood, who have realised little or nothing of that to which their youthful ambition pointed, and who are growing old against their will, there lurked about his heart a certain amount

of spite, which sometimes flashed out in a vicious look when it could do no more, but much more frequently in a hasty lash at some tender point which those around him might have been vainly endeavouring to conceal from his penetrating eye. He was a great gossip, too. Notwithstanding his high pretensions, he could amuse himself with the follies or the failures of the simple people of the neighbourhood, and out of these he could construct an immense variety of characteristic anecdotes for the delectation of his guests, when he chose to make himself agreeable.

It is wonderful what power of repulsion is possessed by a woman of true dignity, when she comes in contact with such a man, and will neither be flattered by his compliments nor entertained by his wit. In vain had Major Inglewood tried the experiment of both

these, and many other means of charming, in his first interview with Alice Gray. He saw at once that with her he should make no progress—should exercise over her no power, and they became like perfect strangers to each other, except for the interchange of those passing civilities which were altogether unavoidable. Alice was satisfied, but the major was not. He was secretly piqued and annoyed by her obduracy, and this created a certain desire to revenge himself upon her. It was difficult to exercise anything like spite upon one so distant, so self-possessed as Alice, and at the same time so utterly regardless of his favour or disfavour; but he could bide his time, and that time came at last, as he thought, very opportunely.

Alice was making a call at the cottage one day late in the autumn, and after a few commonplace remarks, Major Inglewood turned

suddenly towards her with a meaning look, and said,

“Miss Gray, I hope I am the bearer of pleasant news to you. I met in the hunting-field yesterday a friend of yours—Captain Gordon.”

With some people there is a little respite between the shock and the blush, and Alice had just time to look full into the face of the old man, and say, as if quite calmly, “I heard Captain Gordon was there,” before she turned away her head to look down again at some work which Kate had been showing her.

So the arrow missed its aim, for anything the Major could see. The fact was, Alice had been told privately the previous night by Molly that Captain Gordon was in the neighbourhood, that he had taken up his quarters at the Hall, and was going to spend the

hunting-season there, with as much more about him as the neighbourhood was cognisant of, and perhaps a little more.

Disappointed in his first attack, the Major went on again, after awhile but not before Alice had recovered from that inevitable blush which she had in a great measure succeeded in hiding.

“They tell me,” said the Major, “he has had a fortune left him by some maternal uncle, and that his circumstances and position are greatly altered now. I would advise all you young ladies to trim your caps afresh, for it will be no joke to catch the handsome Captain now—rather a different kind of thing, I fancy, from what it was when he lay maundering beneath your father’s roof. Eh ! Miss Gray?”

“He was in a shocking condition then,” said Alice, looking up steadily, and not choos-

ing to understand the last hint of her tormentor. "I only wonder that he ever recovered!"

"There is no making either friend or enemy of this stupid girl," said the Major to himself. "She won't strike fire. Was there ever such a block!" And, having sneered inwardly to his heart's content, he went on expatiating upon the Captain's good looks—perhaps the last subject he would have chosen for his own pleasure. But he liked to extol the value of that which he felt sure Alice would now lose, and lose for ever.

Alice could almost have resorted to her father's favourite expression—"None of these things move me," so strong did she feel under the lash which it pleased the old gentleman to administer. Her indignation at the meanness of his spite—for such she believed it to be—gave her power for the mo-

ment to bear it without flinching. It would have taken a great deal to make her exhibit before him one spark of emotion which she had the skill to conceal. Indeed, her resolution helped her to remain longer in his presence than she had intended, lest he should enjoy the triumph of thinking he had driven her away.

Gladly would Alice have departed unnoticed and alone that day, but Kate followed her as usual to the garden-gate. It was a far greater effort to converse there in her accustomed manner with the daughter, than it had been to sustain the father's ill-natured jests. Alice felt her voice grow almost unmanageable, while she endeavoured to converse on indifferent subjects; and when she tried to smile, her lips felt stiff, and would not yield to the expression without quivering. But the delicacy of her friend gave her

strength. Kate made no remarks bearing the least reference to the subject of disquietude. For anything which she betrayed, she might not even have understood her father's meaning; and now, if she lingered at the gate longer than Alice might have wished, it was with the instinctive feeling that a little chat about indifferent matters would have a more calming effect than a sudden separation.

When Alice reached her own room, she felt forcibly how hard it was that she could not bear what she might have to bear without the impertinence of that spiteful old man. What she might have to bear! Yes. A strange sinking of the heart had succeeded to Molly's information of the night before. Yet why should it be so? There was no earthly reason why Captain Gordon should have written to her, or in any other way have

made her acquainted with his intention of returning to the neighbourhood. There would not have been the least pretence to propriety in his doing so. What was there to blame in him?—what to find fault with in his conduct? Certainly nothing. And yet, when the night came, Alice could not sleep. Something like a pall, blacker than night, closed round her—she knew not how, nor why.

On the following morning, when Alice was sitting at her work in the old oak parlour, her father reading by the fire, she heard a brisk step on the gravel walk leading to the front door, and soon a well-known voice asking if Mr. Gray was at home.

In another moment Captain Gordon was ushered into the room by Molly, to whom he addressed a few playful and pleasant words by the way. It was the Captain himself,

looking so well and handsome—so bold, so gay, so free, it was impossible not to treat him with frankness and cordiality in return. To Mr. Gray he first held out his hand in hearty and cheerful recognition, so managing as to throw in, with his easy address, some appropriate, off-hand expressions of gratitude for all the kindness and hospitality of the past. And then, with Alice he was equally at home, or very nearly so, for he talked fast and freely, speaking with ready warmth of the kind services he had received at her hands, such, as he assured her again and again, it would be impossible for him ever to forget.

It was well for Alice that she had, almost from childhood, cultivated an habitual command over herself—her voice, her features, her modes of expression—so that she could now answer the Captain somewhat

in his own way—talking exclusively about himself—not *herself* at all; asking after his health, and even the poor injured limbs, which she had once dressed and handled with such tender care. To all which inquiries he made playful answers, not scrupling to allude to many particulars of those nights and days of past suffering, about which, perhaps, Alice knew more than he did himself, only leaving out, with a distinctness which she could not fail to be aware of, just one particular—one phase of that strange past, now evidently so far—so very distant, as to seem to Alice, after so short an interval, as if it had belonged to her in some other previous state of existence.

When the interview was over, and the graceful and easy gentleman took his leave, it might have been submitted to the strictest judge of propriety whether he had not done

all that was required of him, and whether he had not done it in the best possible way. Indeed, there was nothing in Captain Gordon's whole manner which the most fastidious and requiring could have found fault with. Even Robert Gray, who accidentally came in during the interview, and who was vexed enough that the Captain had again made his appearance in the neighbourhood—even Robert declared he never saw a man so much improved in his life.

“He speaks out like a gentleman now,” Robert said, “and knows how to behave himself. Why, he even thanked me again for the loan of that ten pounds, though he had returned it punctually enough, and had done all that was necessary at the time. I used to think him so selfish, you know, Alice, and so hard upon you, poor lassie! He seems grateful enough now. Well, I'm glad

he has come to some right sense of things, though I shall never like him, let him come to what he may. But what's the matter, Alice? You don't scold me now for abusing the Captain as you used to do?"

"It seems to me you are praising him, not abusing him now."

"Well, then, you ought to look pleased, just in proportion as you used to be angry; and to my thinking, you don't look pleased at all."

"But I am pleased, though—pleased to see my old patient so well, and pleased that he has behaved in a way to please you."

"Not quite so much as that, perhaps. He will never please me, except by quitting the neighbourhood altogether. They say he is going to remain here through the winter. He has brought a horse down with him, and I

hear from the servants that Huntley's filly is training for him. Well, it's no business of mine, certainly. I know one thing—I shall have enough to do without hunting this season; and as for poor Bonny, my mare, I am obliged to make her cart manure, instead of leaping fences."

With these words, Robert went away about his daily work, in which he found sufficient occupation, and much contentment. He was working for his home, and for the maintenance and comfort of her who was more to him than all the world beside. Perhaps he worked with the more alacrity because the present state of affairs was not in all respects quite as he liked it, and, beyond this, because he believed entirely that when Bessy should become his wife, all would be right both with her and with himself.

Robert had no doubts here. He antici-

pated no heaven upon earth—no sea without its ruffled waves. His view of earthly happiness was a very reasonable one—alternate cloud and sunshine, with a little roughness of temper now and then, and up-hill work, to make such a livelihood as he wished to make for his wife and family. But he never questioned the goodness of Bessy's heart and principles, and, judged of as a whole, he never doubted her affection for himself.

After the interview with Captain Gordon, Alice Gray had a severe attack of that worst kind of vexation—vexation with herself. Why was she not satisfied? Why was she not happy? She was neither; and yet Captain Gordon was well, and prosperous, and evidently enjoying life as much as a man could desire to enjoy it, after his fashion.

The day after his call, there was more cause for rejoicing—more praise for Captain Gordon

—more reason to feel satisfied with him as a man, and a gentleman. At an early hour a message arrived from the Hall, bringing a number of parcels carefully packed, arranged, and addressed. The largest was for Molly, containing a handsome winter cloak, with a note, full of playful reference to her past care and attention to a good-for-nothing soldier laddie, interspersed with irresistible encomiums upon her cookery, as the means of his ultimate recovery.

“To think of that moon-calf!” said Molly, as Mary read the letter to her.

But there were all the while pleasant little twitchings about the corners of her mouth, for the compliments touched her just where she was most vulnerable. And then the cloak! It was precisely what she most wanted, and had been vainly endeavouring to screw out of her small wages.

“There was no harm,” she said, “in taking things in that way from them that have lived upon you, and could afford to give—not a bit. It was nowt but nasty pride an’ high-mindedness to refuse where there had been reel obligation. It was nobbut reet and decent. There could be nae doot about that.”

And she went on smoothing out the cloak, and feeling with her flattened hand the fineness of its texture, until her attention was drawn to other parcels, and unfoldings, for there was some token of remembrance for every member of the family. For Mr. Gray there was a handsomely bound Bible, of a new and popular edition. To Robert, something which felt very much like a teapot, but which no one dared to meddle with until he came in from the fields, when it was discovered to be a beautiful silver teapot, with a note from the Captain, requesting that he might have the

honour of contributing a trifle to the new establishment at Homefield.

Robert was very becomingly pleased. He had no scruple about accepting the gift, because he felt that in Captain Gordon's circumstances he should himself have done the same ; and under such circumstances he considered it more generous to accept such gifts than to refuse them. But Alice, though highly approving of what was done, could not so cordially rejoice, so far as she was herself concerned.

"He is paying us all off," was the secret language of her heart.

And when she had sufficiently admired the various presents, as well as the ingenious and appropriate note by which they were each accompanied, she went up to her own room with a small parcel addressed to herself.

Before ascertaining what the parcel con-

tained, Alice unfolded and read the accompanying letter. As if determined to make the strictest propriety the rule of his conduct, Captain Gordon, in addressing Alice as "Dear Miss Gray," spoke of the little memorial of his gratitude, of which he begged her acceptance, as coming from his aunt, Lady Huntley, not from himself. It was a most elegant and costly bracelet, and the letter went on to say—

"The cameos I feel sure you will like. They were cut in Rome. My aunt having a high appreciation of your taste, as well as your kind services to her worthless nephew, was anxious that you should be reminded of his gratitude by something calculated to afford you pleasure as a work of art."

Alice Gray had probably never seen anything of the kind so beautiful as this bracelet in all her life before, and besides its rarity, it

was a kind of thing exactly suited to her taste. She felt very keenly how much she would like to have one beautiful and valuable thing in her possession—just one ! But from Lady Huntley ? No, she could not accept it. The warm indignant blood rushed for one moment into her face, and then she stood looking at the bracelet some time ; until, at last, pale, and still, and resolute, she replaced it in the case, shut down the clasp, and pushed it from her.

She then seated herself at the table, and after leaning awhile with her head upon her hands, in deep thought, drew her writing-case towards her, and selected pen and paper.

“ Above all things,” she said to herself, “ he must not think I am hurt or piqued because he shows no recollection of the terms on which we parted. Anything rather than that.

And yet I cannot—I absolutely cannot keep that gift.”

At last she began to write. “Dear Sir,” she commenced, and then, with a wonderful assumption of cheerfulness and self-possession, she wrote a letter as correct as the Captain’s own—thanking him very cordially on behalf of those members of the household who were unable to write their own thanks, and giving him quite a lively description of the pleasure which his different but most appropriate remembrances had afforded. Respecting Molly she was even jocose, so much so that the most penetrating reader could not have detected in the letter the least touch of pique or disappointment. Indeed, there was none, only a calm, though strong conviction, that while it was right for every one else to accept these gifts, she neither could nor would accept the bracelet. She therefore concluded her letter,

with many thanks to Lady Huntley, couched in words of somewhat cool politeness. The cameos, she said, were very beautiful, but it had never been her habit to receive presents from those whom she did not know, and, as she had not the honour of Lady Huntley's acquaintance, she must beg respectfully and gratefully to return the bracelet.

The letter required no answer, and no further notice was taken of the matter. Every member of the family appeared too well pleased with their own to make much inquiry about the present Alice had received ; and supposing she had her own reasons for not showing it just then, they let the affair pass over, some of them concluding that she meant to come out with it perhaps on her brother's wedding-day, in order to astonish them all, and create the greater sensation. That it was something wonderfully rare and beautiful they

entertained no doubt ; and so long as it was worthy of her who so richly deserved the best that money could procure, they could wait her time for displaying it. This was conceded, perhaps, the more readily that Alice had constitutionally certain habits of reserve which all her friends respected. No one could be more frank, open, and confiding, up to a certain point, and where others were concerned. Her own secrets she kept strictly as her own, and little was ever gained by attempting to draw them out.

CHAPTER II.

THE reappearance of a gentleman like Captain Gordon, with the reputation of his having come into possession of a fortune, the appropriation of rooms at the Hall for his accommodation, the training of the celebrated filly for his use, and the addition of a groom from London—some said from foreign parts; and all these circumstances greatly enlarged, and added to by the gossip of the neighbourhood, made no little stir amongst the simple folks dwelling in the vicinity of the Hall. Amongst the young lady portion of the community it became a frequent question when they met, “Have you seen Captain Gordon since his return? Isn’t he looking well?—

handsomer than ever!" With many other inquiries and comments all tending to the glorification of the young hero—for it was evident in every quarter that his star was in the ascendant just now.

In all probability Captain Gordon would always have been the free-handed gentleman which he now appeared to the rustic population, if he had had the means of giving. Whether he could ever have practised the heroic virtue of self-denial so as to give to others when he had but little himself, is a different matter. At present it cost him nothing of this kind. He was liberal and consequently popular in the extreme. Not that the people around him were of a character to be won by mere gifts; nothing was further from their nature and habits. But with the possession of plentiful means such as he had never enjoyed in his life before, there appeared in the look,

manner, and habits of Captain Gordon, a certain cheerful and hearty frankness, a disposition to be on good terms with everybody, which is always especially winning to the rough hard-working people of the north. "A real downright good fellow," they would call him, and as such he was now talked about in many circles with great interest and animation.

Amidst all this gossip, Bessy, for once in her life, had the good sense to hold her tongue. Formerly she had been enthusiastic in the praises of the Captain—now she seldom mentioned him, and least of all to Robert. It was just like her, the young women said, when they could elicit nothing from her, "always so contrary," just because they all admired him, she would not say a word.

Amongst those who observed this change, Alice was perhaps the most puzzled to account

for it in her cousin. It was both wise and prudent, she thought; but when had Bessy been either wise or prudent? When had Bessy acted upon right judgment before? Perhaps she was occupied in thinking about her home—her marriage—her future altogether; or perhaps it was her habit, and Pepper, and the hunting-field that occupied her thoughts. However this might be, Bessy seldom mentioned the name of Captain Gordon, and when she did, it was in the most casual and apparently indifferent manner; so that Robert, who had at first wished him at the other side of the world, or anywhere, by degrees grew careless about his being in the neighbourhood, and indeed forgot him altogether.

Under the roofs of the great northern farm-houses of this period, there often congregated in the kitchen, as well as the parlour, a large and heterogeneous community—men, women,

and boys, who, if they each knew their appointed work, and did it, deserved no small share of commendation, for they seemed to come in and have their meals, and sleep, and go out again, without much oversight as to where they went, or what they did.

Amongst this portion of the family at Whinfield was Peter, already mentioned as the cow man, a designation which stood rather in the place of that of groom, none but the higher order of farmers, squires, or gentlemen feeling themselves quite at home with a man kept entirely in the capacity of groom. Indeed the people of whom we speak were far from considering it out of their place to groom their own horses, with the help of a man or boy to clean out the stables, and perform the less agreeable duties belonging to that department. Thus Peter had the care of the cattle generally, and was perhaps less in the stables than amongst

the cows and pigs. He was expressly the house man, for scarcely ever, either in hay time or harvest, did he entirely leave the premises.

Peter had lived at Whinfield from boyhood, until the time of his marriage, when he occupied a cottage adjoining the orchard. He was now a widower. His sons had left him for distant service; and his only daughter, a girl about sixteen, brought up by an aunt, had lately entered upon a situation as nursemaid at Selby. For some years past Peter had again been an inmate of his master's comfortable kitchen, where, his work being over for the day, he occupied the arm-chair of especial dignity beside the fire. Here he was accustomed to give out a little more of morality, as well as law, than the younger servants always liked; but though a strict disciplinarian, he was a good friend to them upon the whole.

Indeed, Peter was a good friend to all the family, a staunch and true supporter of the honour of his master's house, with one especial favourite, one pride in his heart, one warm spot in his affections, which nothing ever cooled or changed, or in the least degree brought down to the standard of other people and things. This favourite was Bessy. He had taught her to ride "when nobbut a babby, poor thing!" he would often say. He had watched over her with the jealousy of something more than a parent. He had nothing but forgiveness for her faults, if, indeed, he saw any faults in her to forgive. There was a luminous atmosphere about her always to him, which made him sometimes wonder what was the matter with other people's eyes, that they could not see her as he did. No matter what she said, or what she did, all was right with Peter. He was

prepared to defend her to the death, and would have died for her, there is no manner of doubt—died cheerfully, had such a sacrifice been required in her service.

Perhaps, too, there was something in Bessy's own nature peculiarly calculated to make her both lovely and beloved to such a man as Peter. Her beauty was exactly of the kind which he could appreciate—"None o' yer poor sickly, yalla things, that mak' a man badly to look at 'em!" A fine, large, well-made, healthy, wholesome, hearty-looking woman—this was Peter's notion of beauty; and not a very bad one either. Beyond this, Bessy's innate love of fun, when the humour was upon her; her towering, outspoken passion when she was vexed; her merry laugh when she was pleased; her daring when she rode; her love of animals; her frequent visits to the stable; and the frankness of seeming equality,

which she could assume at will, and always did assume with Peter—these were claims upon his admiration and fidelity, which added to and strengthened that deep abiding love attaching to her in childhood, as the first-born of his master's house—the honoured representative, in his eyes, of the beauty and worth of the whole family.

Nor was Bessy insensible to the homage rendered to her from this quarter. Through many a scrape Peter had been her only confidant, and her ever-ready helper. She might have trusted him with every secret of her heart. He would never have betrayed her. Most likely he would never have blamed her, and that was a good deal to Bessy, who, though high-spirited, and resentful under the immediate operation of blame, did not like it any more than others, and would sometimes

stoop lower than seemed consistent with her character, to avoid it.

The vexation of being told, as she was again and again, that her old pony was ceasing to be able to carry her, and, perhaps, half suspecting that it was so herself, had a peculiarly unpleasant effect upon Bessy's temper about this time. She was the more vexed, because so many of her well-meaning relatives had expressed it as their opinion that it would be well for her to give up riding now, to be more quiet, and attend more to getting her house, her things, and herself ready for the great event to take place in the early spring.

Bessy always hated this kind of talk ; nor had she ever entertained any ardent desire to be married, in the strict sense of mere sober marriage. She liked her cousin Robert—that she always maintained ; and she thought

she should like a house of her own. But why need they talk to her so stupidly about being quiet, and staying at home, and making her clothes—sewing seams, and hemming hems. She was sick of the whole affair, she said sometimes, and had a great mind to give it up.

As usual, under the pressure of public opinion, Bessy resolved to do her own way ; but she would do it quietly, she thought, this time. She would not openly oppose them before the time, and then perhaps they would mind their own business, and leave her alone. Acting upon this plan, she took Peter into her counsels. He had the care of Pepper, and the old pony was to be made up for her to ride through the winter. “It was absurd,” she said—“did not Peter think so?—to say that Pepper would never carry her again!”

“Eigh, eigh!” said Peter ; for to think

differently from Bessy would have been the blackest treason, according to his creed. "We'll see all aboot that. Never doot bud he'll carry you, an' weel too ; nobbut ev a bit o' care."

"Why," said Bessy, "I shan't go at a fence, you see, nor at a five-barred gate !"

"Nowt at soort," responded Peter, with a nod of the head which seemed to imply that he and Bessy had wisdom enough between them to govern the nation. But while he assented, and really persuaded himself into believing what he said, an anxious expression spread over his countenance, and he drew his hand thoughtfully along the back of the pony, and down to his hind legs, as if he knew where the weakness lay. More especially he examined one point, and pressed with his thumb upon a part which made the animal flinch, so that Bessy, who watched him atten-

tively, called out that he was hurting it, pressing and pinching it in that way.

“It’s enough to make anything flinch,” she said. “You see,” she added, when Peter had left off handling the pony, “I want him particularly for next Tuesday.”

“Eigh, eigh !” said Peter, “ah knaws all about it. Hoonds ’ll be oot.”

“Yes,” said Bessy ; “but you need not say anything about that.”

“Leave me alone,” replied Peter, with as much contempt in his tone as was consistent with his reverence for the incomparable being with whom he had to do. “Doan’t ah knaw all about it ? Nobody need niver be telling me when to keep a quiet tonge i’ my ’ed !”

Bessy then entered with great animation upon some items of diet for her pony, by which she thought he might be gaining strength before the eventful day ; and, having

discharged this duty, she saw another lying directly before her, which she was not able to look quite so boldly in the face. She had already told her father that she intended to mount the pony on Tuesday, just to ride down the field with him to look—"only to look;" and now she had to communicate the same piece of information to Robert.

Coward that she was—for even the boldest women are cowards sometimes—Bessy felt quite unable to proclaim her intention all at once. When Monday came, she had not even made a beginning, and Robert, having gone out early about his farm, she did not know where to find him. See him she must, and tell him too; for that, she knew, was the only way to turn away his wrath. So she set out after dinner to the Home Farm, and there was Robert, working by himself in the plot of ground behind their future home, and

which he was diligently converting into a kitchen-garden. Here, then, was the place, and now the time, to give Robert pleasure by showing an interest in what he was doing; and Bessy, with a little trick of art, not very congenial to her nature, began to ask him questions about the garden, and to evince altogether more solicitude about rows of gooseberry-bushes, and beds of onions, than she had ever manifested before.

“ See what it is,” thought he in his honest heart, “ for people to look upon a thing as their own ! After all, we shall get on gloriously if she begins to care about such things as these ! ” And Robert worked on, in a very happy and complacent mood, Bessy standing near him, and even holding some of the bushes steady while he filled in the earth at their roots, and stamped it down with his feet.

At last it must come. Bessy gasped a little for breath to speak—

“Robert,” she said, “I’m going to mount Pepper to-morrow, notwithstanding what you said.”

“And what then?” asked Robert, not very well pleased. “When you have mounted him, what then?”

“Oh! I’m only going with my father down the meadow, and a little way along the lane, just to look, you know—only to look.”

“Looking is dangerous sometimes, Bessy. If some people look they are sure to leap, notwithstanding the proverb.”

“I shall not leap. You may be very sure of that.”

“I warn you not. I really do warn you, Bessy,” said Robert, very gravely, while he rested a moment on his spade, and looked intently in her face. “This is no fancy of

mine. It is not even that I think you would be better at home ; but I do assure you that old pony of yours is wrong in some way, and if you attempt even to gallop him he'll come down, as sure as I stand here."

"I told you I was only going to look," Bessy repeated, and she spoke this time with a degree of petulance which made Robert less pleased than before.

"You need not be angry with me, Bessy," he said. "I'm not speaking for myself. I shall be delving here all day. It can make no difference to me, only I don't want you to throw away your life, especially in mere child's play, just now."

"My life is safe enough, for anything it's worth!" said Bessy, pouting. And then a few pearly tears came stealing down her cheeks.

What could Robert do? He did what

wiser men than he have done—he kissed them off; and then, holding her for a moment close to his heart, he bade her go and do as she liked. He wished he could be with her to take care of her, but that was impossible.

So Bessy went her way, without once looking back, or asking any other question about the onion-beds and “berry-trees.”

Everything seemed now more favourable to Bessy’s schemes than she could have anticipated; and the following morning the sun rose upon a scene well calculated to inspire with fresh life both man and horse. Pepper was in high “fettle,” as the saying was in the stable, and about the yard, and Bessy, mounted in her new habit, was a picture for a gallant knight to see. If, in the first instance, her father had thought she would be better at home, he was always so delighted to see how she rode, and looked, and how the

little horse stepped along, that he soon lost all anxiety about the matter, if, indeed, he had ever felt any ; but Mr. Bell was not a man much under the influence of anxieties of any kind. In any present pleasure he soon lost every fear of future harm ; and especially in the excitement of the hunting-field, he was apt to forget that any duty devolved upon him beyond that of keeping up with the hounds, and not laming his horse.

Whatever Mr. Bell might have felt on account of his daughter on this occasion was soon lost in the pleasure and pride of seeing how handsome she looked, and how much she was admired by the sportsmen who were ambling about the place of meeting. Perhaps some of them wondered that Robert was not by her side, and they came the nearer for that reason, and paid their compliments with the less reserve.

Soon, however, the attention of all was attracted by the appearance of Captain Gordon, curvetting along the turf, and making up to Mr. Bell and his daughter. He was mounted on the filly, to which all eyes were directed, in no disparagement to Bessy's charms; for that woman must have been beautiful, indeed, who could take precedence of any horse with a pedigree like that, and now tried for the first time in the field. It was indeed a splendid animal, and even Bessy looked from the rider to the horse. If ever in her life it should be her happiness to ride a creature like that, she thought within herself. But she checked the thought, and for the first time, perhaps, she felt vexed with little Pepper, although he was looking his very best that morning—at least, the best he had looked for the last twelve months.

Captain Gordon was all animation and

good-humour, looking almost as handsome as the animal he rode, and sitting with the grace, and managing it with the skill of a thoroughly practised horseman. Perhaps Bessy was a little put upon her mettle because he looked curiously at her pony, and seemed inclined, she thought, to laugh.

“I’m only come to look,” she said. “But I have gone with the hounds sometimes, and taken pretty strong fences too.”

“You won’t favour us in that way to-day, I think, Miss Bell,” said the Captain.

“I don’t know,” replied Bessy, tossing back her head with an air of defiance.

The Captain evidently enjoyed Bessy’s petulance, as all gentlemen did. Her fits of humour and caprice—even her temper, when not at the best, with all her varieties of accompanying look and manner, amused and delighted them amazingly.

Soon there was a stir in the camp, and all the idle badinage was over for a while. A fox was started, and hounds and horses went off in style. Little Pepper went too—how could Bessy keep him in? Perhaps she did not try. Her father was soon far ahead, for, as she had repeatedly assured him that she only came to look, he considered that no further care on her account was necessary. His duty was done, seeing that she had nothing to do but ride leisurely home.

But Bessy did not ride home. She wanted just to show the gay Captain how her little horse could go, and for awhile he kept on wonderfully, her companion, so far as he was able to manage his horse, keeping always along the best and the safest road. In this manner they went on for some time, Bessy losing all idea of danger, and declaring that her pony carried her as well as it had ever

done. What could the stupid people mean by saying that he was done for?

The hounds had made a circuit, and now they were coming down the hill directly in sight again. Bessy thought she would only just keep on until the gentlemen should see that her pony *could* go still, and then she would stop, and ride quietly home. By this time the Captain had enough to do with his own unpractised steed. A fence, with a deep ditch, separated them from the field, towards the bottom of which the whole troop were coming.

“Take care of yourself, Miss Bell!” cried the Captain, as he flew past Pepper towards the fence, and cleared it in a manner which excited universal applause. What possessed Bessy at the moment it might have been difficult to explain, but almost close up to the heels of the fine animal which Captain

Gordon rode, went little Pepper, as proud as the best. A sudden thrill seemed to silence the horsemen when they saw what was about to occur. It was the work of a moment. The pony cleared the fence, but the spring he made was too short, and the ditch on the other side was wide and deep.

Captain Gordon was but just able to wheel round, when he saw, to his horror, what had happened. He was on his feet in an instant with one or two others, from whom a mountain seemed to be lifted when they saw that Bessy was safe. In a surprising manner she had alighted on the side of the ditch clear away from both saddle and stirrup; and, springing lightly upon the bank, she began to laugh, and shake her dishevelled hair, and replace her hat upon her head.

But what of poor little Pepper? Some of the men, amongst whom was her father, had

gathered around the pony, and Bessy soon saw by their looks that something was grievously wrong.

“Don’t go there,” said Captain Gordon, taking hold of Bessy’s arm, and endeavouring to lead her away—“don’t go into that crowd; they will manage the pony, never fear.”

But Bessy would go, and she pressed forward amongst the men to see—oh, horror!—the poor old faithful creature struggling with one broken limb, and other injuries, which made him ghastly and frightful to look at, for he was making desperate but vain attempts to extricate himself from the position in which he had fallen.

“What is it?” cried Bessy, in the wildest terror; “oh! father, what is it?”

“Go away, child,” said Mr. Bell. “This is no sight for you.”

“But I only want to know what it is,” she persisted.

“His hind leg is broken,” said one of the men, “just above the fetlock, and—”

Again there was another desperate struggle. Even those strong men could not bear to witness the agony of the poor animal. Mr. Bell called loudly to the huntsman for his knife. Bessy knew then what was going to be done. She covered her face with both her hands, and sobbing violently, exclaimed,

“I’d rather they should kill me!—I would indeed!”

“Will nobody take that foolish girl away?” said Mr. Bell, now half angry, but still intent upon the business in hand, for it was evident there was nothing to be done so merciful as to put the old pony out of his misery as quickly as possible.

Captain Gordon willingly took charge of

Bessy, now altogether powerless; and half carrying her from the spot, he placed her on the soft green sward, at the foot of a tree, at some little distance from the scene of death. Here Bessy fainted outright, falling back unconsciously into the supporting arms of her anxious and careful attendant. There was nothing to be done but to wait until life should return, to animate the now senseless form. The greatest number of the riders had gone on with the hounds, as soon as it was ascertained that Bessy was safe; and those who remained were closely occupied about the pony. It was nothing more than an ordinary fainting fit. Captain Gordon saw and understood that, though the poor girl looked deathly enough. He could not leave her, and there was nothing to be had in the way of restoratives, so he satisfied himself with chafing her cold hands, unfastening the ribbon

round her throat, and doing all those little offices which common kindness suggests.

To do the young man justice, it must be owned that none could have been more delicate or more kind ; for while he tended his patient like an experienced nurse, he did so with a degree of respect which would have done no dishonour to a knight-errant of the olden times. Yet, somehow, one thinks that if Robert Gray had been passing by at the moment, he might not have been very much pleased to see his affianced bride reclining there, and depending, as it seemed, almost for her life, upon the tender assiduities of a comparative stranger.

Happily Robert did not pass that way. In all probability he never knew the exact particulars of what took place that day. Mr. Bell thought only of the old pony, and spoke afterwards only of him, for he had loved the

poor animal, he often said, as a man loves his dog, or better. And yet, he would add, in consideration of his daughter's feelings, "Perhaps it was as well. It was only the pain of a moment. His best days were over, and he might have lingered a long while without much pleasure in his life." To which Mrs. Bell would add, in her quiet way, "He might have lived in the paddock, and eaten the sweetest grass for many a year to come." And then Bessy would exclaim impatiently, "Don't talk in that way—you only make things worse by talking." So by degrees the subject was entirely dropped by the family, although the remarks of the neighbours were tolerably free upon this last act of Bessy's madness, by which she had, as they expressed it, done for herself, and her pony too.

The death of her pony, and the cruel manner of its death, was perhaps the first

real grief which Bessy Bell had ever known, and it was the more difficult to bear because of her own rashness and folly, now standing so prominently forward before her eyes, as well as before the eyes of others. In fact, it was a bitter grief, as well as a real one, with no palliating circumstances attending it. It was a grief under which even Peter himself could do nothing to soothe, though he endeavoured, with unfailing assiduity, to make the best of the whole matter.

Perhaps the best apology was found in Bessy's own big tears, which almost always made their appearance when the subject was revived, and often when she was silently thinking of it herself. It seems a little hard that some women can weep rivers of tears without exciting much compassion, while a girl like Bessy can scarcely shed one without awakening acute and tender sympathy. It was

especially so on this occasion. Even Robert spared her—perhaps he thought the circumstance would eventually do her good. All who loved her shared this welcome and encouraging hope.

Bessy herself, when she talked with her cousin Alice alone in the moss-house by the brook, said she thought it was a bad omen—that it foreboded some greater disaster—something sad and gloomy in her future. To which Alice would not unreasonably reply—

“Why Bessy, you have Robert still. Surely you may bear the loss of a pony, when you have so much left. How many girls in your place would feel themselves both rich and happy !”

CHAPTER III.

FROM the time of her unfortunate exploit in the hunting-field, a change, although at first a very slight one, was observable in Bessy Bell ; and especially in her intercourse with her cousin Alice. One of the most striking features of this change was, that she appeared even less interested than previously in the preparations going forward for her marriage. People said it was all natural enough—that girls were always flat and mokey as that time drew near. But this was not all. Bessy was anything but flat. Her wild spirits were at times such as nobody could account for, and then her fits of depression were equally causeless and excessive.

If Robert Gray perceived this change, and if he felt it more than others, he wisely kept the matter to himself. He had less time than ever now for humouring the caprices of any woman, or even for the gentler offices of soothing.

“If I seem a rough and careless companion to you now, Bessy,” he would often say, “I will make up for all afterwards. You may depend upon me for that. So far as I know myself, I won’t fail you here. But, you see, there is so much to do, and so few hands to do it. You must bear with me a little while. Only have faith, and all will be well.”

So Robert went on day after day doing the work of two men rather than one, and only wishing that he could hasten the time of his marriage by doing more.

While Robert Gray looked straight onward, as was his wont, his clear steadfast gaze

taking in only the objects on which he was most intent, his sister, with womanly intuition, discovered many relative or collateral objects, lying, as it were, beside the path which she was treading. Perhaps even Alice could, just at this period, have seen more, had not her penetrating glance been a little over-strained in looking towards one point.

For her own especial trial Alice had had to call up all the heroism of her nature. She had met her fate with unflinching fortitude, and now the great thing with her was to prevent any one—especially one above all others—seeing that there had been any trial at all in her case. It was evident that no one really suspected what had transpired between herself and her patient before he left her father's roof, although some, like Major Inglewood, might entertain a notion tending that way. Even he, who had been the chief actor

in the transaction, so evidently desired the past to be forgotten, that she had nothing to do but forget it as quickly as she could.

Bravely, therefore, Alice went about her accustomed avocations, breathing no sigh of regret—uttering no word of complaint. Bravely she gave herself to the interests and occupations of those around her. Bravely, because cheerfully, she entered into all the details of what filled up their lives, never once betraying the fact that she had recently been swept over as by a heavy wave, which had left her, perhaps stronger—perhaps better than before ; but yet by such a wave as she felt that she would not encounter again for all the world.

Day by day, and night by night, Alice seemed now to strip herself afresh, as it were, from the weeds and entanglements which the great wave had left behind ; and day by day,

and night by night, she became more free. But she could not quite get rid of the remembrance of how the sea of life looked to her before its waves were stirred. It was impossible to forget all at once, just now when everything reminded her again so forcibly of the past. She could not keep down every upspringing thought. She could not shut her ears when a tone of the old melody came back, nor close her eyes when the book of her young heart's record was opened, and its leaves one after another were unfolded before her eyes.

It happened, one morning, about this time, that Alice and her friend, Kate Inglewood, were enjoying a brisk winter's walk together, for this was one of the favourite methods with Alice of getting rid of troublesome thoughts. To her natural disposition it would have been more congenial to sit and muse, and brood

over subjects, even of painful interest. But her nature had recently so nearly betrayed her on a tender point, that she determined, if possible, to substitute healthy habit in place of morbid indulgence ; and knowing how much her friend required the same invigorating tonic, she had lately often asked her to be the sharer of long walks, from which they both derived the benefit so much needed.

It was a clear frosty morning, the grass sounding dry and crisp beneath the feet, when the two friends turned their steps into a plantation, through which ran a bridle path, leading from Applegarth to a village situated in the opposite direction to Norton. This path was but little frequented, scarcely at all in the winter months ; but in summer it was more attractive, leading amongst the stems of young healthy trees, whose tender boughs

already made a slight and tremulous archway over head.

There was little beauty in the boughs at this season of the year, but the mossy turf below, interspersed here and there with yellow fronds of dead fern, had a certain kind of charm of its own; while ever and anon the melancholy warble of a solitary robin seemed to invite the companionship of those who trod this secluded path. The place was known as the Poplar Dell, in part because it communicated with the farm called the "Poplars," certainly not because the trees which formed the copse were poplars, for they were chiefly ash and birch, such as made a feathery canopy in summer, with here and there one that seemed to have stolen from the rest to stoop beside the brook, and dress its drooping hair in the crystal mirror below.

Along the crisp grass the friends walked cheerily together, talking earnestly at intervals, and then pausing to pick some golden moss or silver lichen from the roots of the trees. In this pleasant occupation they were engaged, when suddenly they heard voices, as they thought, and looking up, saw two figures walking very leisurely along the path towards them. Bessy they instantly recognised as one. Alice knew quite as quickly and as certainly who the other was, but she kept her own counsel.

“I thought,” said Kate, in a hurried, almost breathless manner—“I thought it was your brother.”

It seemed impossible for her to believe that the second figure ought to be, or could be, anyone but Robert Gray walking with Bessy in that secluded spot. And yet it was not Robert, but a more slender and agile figure,

leading a beautiful horse by the bridle rein. Both looked more absorbed in each other than Kate conceived it right or even possible that they should be under existing circumstances, and therefore it was that her breath fluttered, and her voice hesitated, for she felt shocked and pained to a degree beyond what she would have liked to confess.

It must be remembered, however, that Kate Inglewood's notions of propriety had been formed in a very different school from those of Bessy and her cousin Alice. The social liberty of that country life was a thing uncommon and strange to her. Of this liberty what right had Captain Gordon to be a partaker, for it was he who walked with Bessy? He had met her in his morning ride, and immediately dismounting, they had strolled on together in that slow, idle way—not idle, perhaps, to themselves—until, by mutual

choice, they had turned into Poplar Dell, not certainly because it was the nearest way to Whinfield.

Bessy could often put on a bold look when she was frightened enough within herself, and she did so now. The Captain appeared delighted to meet the two ladies, and shook hands, and complimented Alice on the healthy bloom which the frosty air had given her, and which she was very glad he should attribute to that cause, and to no other.

For the sake of her own dignity, Alice strove hard to appear cheerful and unconcerned. For herself, indeed, she had scarcely any feeling left just at that moment, so absorbing was the anxiety which took possession of her on behalf of her brother. Bessy must have been painfully aware of this, for she was evidently unnerved, embarrassed, uncomfortable, in the extreme; and so she did—what

is not unusual in such cases—she rattled on, talking incoherent nonsense, without meaning or purpose, and even saying what, in her calmer moments, she was likely to wish unsaid.

“What do you think?” said Bessy, in the same wild way—“Captain Gordon is persuading me to ride Red Rose”—the name she had herself bestowed on the bay filly. “He must have a design against my life. Don’t you think he has, Miss Inglewood?”

Miss Inglewood thought very little about either the horse or the rider; but she thought a good deal about Bessy walking alone with that man—so much so, that she was unprepared with a reply; and Alice relieved her from the difficulty by looking steadily in her cousin’s face, and saying in a firm and decided manner,

“I hope you don’t mean to try.”

“Why not?” said Bessy, sharply, for she understood that look and defied it.

“Because,” replied Alice, “if you do not value your own life, I know one who does, and who has a right to expect that you will take care of your life for him.”

“You are not fond of riding, I think, Miss Gray,” said the Captain, interfering, and hoping to allay what seemed a little like a gathering storm.

“Oh! yes, I am,” replied Alice; “I ride a great deal. We are all brought up to riding in this neighbourhood.”

“Perhaps you are timid.”

“Not in the least.”

“Will *you* make the first experiment on Red Rose, then? I assure you she is perfect for a lady, and extremely gentle.”

“Thank you,” said Alice, “I prefer my own. As regards horses, generally, my father

always taught us it is dangerous either to lend or borrow."

"But you see," continued the Captain, "Miss Bell has no horse of her own now."

And thus he went on, endeavouring to smooth the matter down with endless plausibilities, to all which Alice replied as mildly and moderately as she could, fearing nothing so much as that he should construe any warmth or earnestness on her part into jealousy or pique. Thus she became almost powerless with regard to her cousin; and could do nothing to prevent the mischief which seemed impending, but turn back, and walk in company with the Captain and Bessy, until they should separate. This she was determined to do for the sake of her brother, for if he should be about in the fields, and meet them in a party of four, it would look much less remarkable than as the two ap-

peared when slowly wending their way along the dell.

“I will speak to her alone,” thought Alice, “for this thing must not go on.”

And with this resolution she maintained her part in the conversation, neither daunted nor angry, nor anything which the vainest of men could lay hold of so as to torture it into wounded feeling.

Alice's wound was fast healing; only there were continually slight hurts occurring, which hindered the healing process; as in the present instance when, as she and Kate walked a little way behind, she caught now and then a look directed to her cousin, or heard the peculiar tones of that voice once so familiar to her ear; and then her thoughts flew back to the past, and had to be dragged by strong effort out of the sick-chamber, or away from the fire-side in the old parlour, where she

made tea for her guest, and played, as it seemed now, at hospitality, and many things besides.

What had become of that past, so rich and full as it was to her? It was of no use asking now. All had vanished from him who shared it with her. All should be extinguished, she resolutely determined, with her, even if she stamped out the last spark amongst the dead ashes beneath her feet.

On reaching the open field at the termination of the plantation path, the gay Captain bade the ladies good morning, and springing lightly into his saddle, gracefully lifted his hat, and rode away at a canter, as if to prove the truth of his words, that Red Rose was a perfect lady's horse.

The picture was complete in its way, and Bessy looked after the horse and its rider as if she thought so. Perhaps Alice was of the

same opinion, but Kate Inglewood, who professed to be no judge of such matters, could find no pleasure in contemplating a picture associated as this was in her mind with something so nearly false and base ; and turning her head with an air of indifference, she spoke rather more sharply than was usual with her of the necessity of hastening home.

After the event of the morning, it became evident to Alice that her cousin did not wish to hold with her any close or serious intercourse, and yet she was determined that sooner or later she should hear the truth from her lips. To Robert she absolutely dared not speak on the subject, and she was content to believe there was no actual reason why she should. It was but a trifle, she told herself every hour of the day—a mere accidental meeting. In fact, how could Bessy help herself, if she was out walking alone, and a

gentleman chose to dismount and walk beside her ?

“ There was no harm,” she repeated to herself, “ in what was done, and past ; but what of the future ? Bessy seemed to lose her senses on the subject of riding, and if she should accept the Captain’s offer, and ride with him ? ”

“ That catastrophe must be prevented, come what may,” said Alice to herself. And with this resolution unshaken in her mind, she awaited her opportunity for speaking to her cousin alone, and speaking directly to the point.

Bessy, as may be supposed, was no adept at deceiving. If ever she nursed in secret a design opposed to the wishes and persuasions of her friends, she was almost sure to betray — nay, even to declare it before the time for acting upon it arrived. Was she, of all people,

beginning now for the first time in her life to be silent—reserved—mysterious? Alice wondered, for she strove in vain to bring her back into their old intimacy. She tried walking with her cousin, but Bessy took one of her little sisters with her. She tried the moss-house, but Bessy was in haste, and could not stay. She tried her cousin's room upstairs, but Bessy called her mother in on some pretence about examining a new dress. All this awakened in Alice a kind of vague suspicion, such as she had never entertained in relation to her cousin before. She was disturbed—alarmed—but what could she do?

Robert Gray went working on, faithful and true to the one purpose of his life. Bessy vexed him sometimes, as she did everybody; but the strong hold which she had upon the hearts of her friends depended chiefly upon her outspoken uncompromising sincerity. If Bessy

should begin to deceive—to take advantage of the trusting faith of those who loved her, all would be over with her and them. But no. She had hitherto been as undisguised in repenting, as she was wilful in acting; and beyond the rash freaks of a daring girl, there was no human being who suspected her, least of all did that faithful single-hearted man who had loved her from childhood, and who now clung to her with an affection passing the love of woman.

Happily for Robert, he had been off at dawn of day, riding a distance of twelve miles to market one morning, when a little scheme of Bessy's was about to be put in practice. Mr. Bell was gone to the same market, though not so early, and both were expected to be absent till late in the afternoon. Alice was engaged at home. Mr. Spink, the lawyer, had arrived, and her father appeared always

most solicitous that this man should be hospitably entertained, and that Alice especially should not fail in any of those kind attentions usually offered to an honoured guest.

To Alice herself, nothing could well be more irksome and annoying than the part she was called upon to act on these occasions. As the mistress of her father's house, she was bound to be hospitable and attentive to his friends; and had this been all, she would have been the last person to rebel, even in thought. But her womanly instincts had lately told her that there were certain projects on the way, in which she herself was concerned, and that the smooth complacent man who came so often, and made himself so much at home in her father's house, and who, beyond any other person, shared her father's confidence, was hoping—nay, absolutely expecting to share hers also.

Few women are wholly without the power of warding off such advances. Few are without the means of making their own feelings understood, almost as soon as the advance begins ; that is, when they have not a peculiarly dense material to deal with. Alice was unfortunate in this respect, for the perceptions of the individual with whom she had to do were so clogged by his natural self-complacency, that he could not be made to see, and would not understand the truth.

Thus the day in question was one of close and vexatious duty to Alice, who wished in vain that she could escape, and run up the field to Whinfield, where she thought it possible she might then see her cousin alone ; the master of the house being absent, her aunt at such times generally closely occupied in household arrangements, and the children running wild in different directions.

While Alice was secretly indulging this wish, her cousin Bessy was putting on her habit, arranging her hair, and making evident preparations for a ride on horseback. A smart groom was leading Red Rose backwards and forwards past the door, with a woman's saddle on its back; while Captain Gordon was adjusting his stirrups, and making all ready to mount another horse, which Peter, with a peculiar expression on his face, was holding for him.

Peter had been very silent that morning, and he was silent now. Bessy had not been very talkative with him; she had only told him that a gentleman would call to take her out for a ride on a beautiful horse, and that he must make himself decent and tidy, and be ready in attendance.

Even when Bessy came down, looking bright and fresh as a May morning, Peter

had nothing to say: He was "clean knocked doon," as he described himself afterwards; and he looked as if he was, especially when Captain Gordon bent gracefully to assist Bessy into the saddle, to which she sprang light and laughing, as if what she was doing was altogether a right and pleasant thing.

Red Rose had been very carefully trained by Captain Gordon's groom, and both riders went off splendidly. Peter remained rooted to the spot, without one touch of pride or pleasure in his looks. And how he had looked after that girl sometimes, when he had helped her to mount old Pepper, and watched her ride away! Upon his honest, weather-beaten features now a strange wonder was depicted which was altogether destitute even of admiration as well as pleasure—a sort of blank amazement which found vent in only one expression, when at last, with

a peculiar nod of the head, he exclaimed, "The dearee me!" and then, as if that was not enough, "The dear-y me!"

With this Peter, bending down his head, went slowly back to his accustomed work. As he turned into the stable he heaved a deep sigh—nay, he absolutely swept the sleeve of his old coat across his eyes, wanting, as he persuaded himself, to see more clearly whether the bit of old Pepper's bridle was worth cleaning again. He thought not. Scarcely anything appeared to Peter that morning to be worth doing. One thing after another he took up and cast aside, and still he tried to work, but it was heavily, sadly—as he had never worked before. What he did was constantly interrupted by those deep sighs, almost amounting to groans, at last taking form in these few but expressive words, "It's ower'd noo!"

Robert Gray had gone off early that morning in order that he might return early. He had to see a person on business that afternoon, and having soon met with a customer in the market for his wheat, he was riding home at a brisk but steady trot, scarcely observing anything either before or behind him, so intent were his thoughts upon the money transactions of the day. While thinking carefully over the bargains he had made, and calculating other additional sums to be gained, as he hoped, the following week, he hardly noticed that his horse turned into a road a little deviating from the turnpike, but which, as being less frequented, he was accustomed to choose on dusty summer days. It was all one to him, only a trifle further round. It led over higher ground, too, and so rendered it necessary for him, in one part of the way, to slacken his pace.

From the highest portion of this road a traveller could look down into a kind of dell, or hollow, entirely hidden from the public way, and lying at a considerable distance from it. Robert had hired a field of turnips of a farmer in this neighbourhood, and he suddenly bethought himself, chance having brought him so near, that he might as well ride on a little way in that direction, and look at his sheep. It would save him a journey on purpose, and time was growing every day more precious. So Robert rode down the hill, and was soon in the field, making careful investigation as to how long the crop of turnips would be likely to hold out. Still his thoughts were on business, as they had been all the day. The pleasure so soon to be his, and his always, looked perhaps all that time too fixed, and certain to require much thinking about. So he rode on still thoughtful,

and absorbed in his pounds, shillings, and pence, until startled by the sound of horses coming up at a rapid pace behind him. In another moment, as it seemed like a flash of lightning, two riders flew past.

To describe the astonishment of Robert Gray would be impossible. He neither quickened his speed, nor stopped, but went steadily on, his eyes fixed upon a fluttering female figure, every line and movement of which he knew too well.

We have described Bessy Bell as naturally a courageous young lady; but to tell the truth, she was at her wits end to know what to do just at that precise moment of her experience. Gladly as she would in all probability have gone on, and the faster the more agreeable under existing circumstances, she did not obey the natural impulse, but reined in her

steed, wheeled round, and confronted her lover, with Captain Gordon by her side.

“I am having such a delightful ride,” cried Bessy, in rather a wild sort of way, and laughing as well as she could, with the help of her bright face and rosy lips.

“I’m glad you enjoy it,” said Robert, slightly raising his hat in a kind of mock deference to the lady and her knight; and he too laughed in a certain way.

Captain Gordon thought him quite good-humoured and facetious. Bessy understood the case better. That strange laugh of Robert’s, and his manner altogether, sent a sudden terror to her heart; but she could do nothing to appease his wrath just then, and for a few minutes the three rode on, perhaps as uncomfortably as any people could ride, who had only the one satisfaction of being mounted to their liking. To Robert it was impossible to

go far in such companionship. Indeed, they were now drawing near home, so, turning his horse into a bye-path through the fields, he bid them good morning, and, saying that was his nearest way, rode home.

Robert wanted no dinner that day; and finding that his father was engaged with Mr. Spink, who was no favourite of his, he made excuses to old Molly, stating that he had had all the dinner he wanted in the market town before he left. He then saw the man who had appointed to meet him on business, and afterwards betook himself to his own unfurnished, desolate-looking house at Home-field.

The workmen were just leaving, for darkness was closing in, and Robert took possession of the place with the greatest satisfaction, for he wanted nothing so much as to be entirely alone. Alone then, he seated himself upon a

carpenter's bench, and picking up a few chips, began mechanically to revive the dying embers which the workmen had left in the grate. Here he sat until darkness fell all around him, except for the little glimmer of the fire which he still kept up, scarcely knowing what he did. Wretched as that unfurnished place would have appeared both within and without to any one capable of estimating comfort in the usual way, to Robert it was all he wanted just then—a place of refuge, and a place entirely his own, where he could sit and think without the chance of interruption.

Sit and *feel* might have been a more appropriate expression, for Robert found it impossible to think in any definite or collected manner; and he wanted to feel, however painful the process might be—to feel over again the sensations of the day, so as to

ascertain, as a matter of certainty, what they were. In fact, the surprise had been to him so sudden, the sensations so entirely new, that it was absolutely necessary for him to gather them up, as it were, from that strange shock and disruption, and ascertain, not only what they were, but from whence they came, and whither they were tending.

All strong natures have at one time or other something like this kind of experience—times when, conscious of a new force called into action by some unexpected convulsion, they become almost terrible to themselves, so great is their power at such moments both to dare, and to do—so entirely are they then set free from all the prescribed rules and conventionalities of life—set free even from self, as it has previously restrained them—set free to ruin themselves, or others, in any way that may suggest

itself to them under the delirium of the moment.

To say that such moods are dangerous, is to use an expression too mild for the occasion. Even the individuals who are liable to such moods may be said to be dangerous, and Robert Gray was naturally one of these. Brought up in a strict and self-denying school, habitually, and, to all appearance, one of the most rational and moderate of men, he was yet one of those who could, under certain circumstances and conditions of feeling, do desperate deeds, such as a life-time would be insufficient to undo. And all this because, beneath his cool and manly bearing, he felt so deeply, and was so resolute—so full of power, and will, and desperate purpose, that even now he was almost a terror to himself.

And yet Robert Grey sat very still—pick, picking at the little chips, and placing them

upon the wretched-looking fire, with as much exactness as if his life depended upon their growing into a flame. Still picking, and pottering about the miserable hearth, he was at length startled by a click at the outer door. A footstep approached. A woman's form passed into the room where he was seated, and came and stood close beside him. It was Bessy, muffled in a cloak, looking much like those poor women who have no other hope but confession to a human ear, for the pardon of their sins—it was Bessy penitent, and come to confession.

How Bessy managed to make her peace, it would be difficult to describe. But she did manage it for this time, and the only penance insisted upon, was that she should never sin in the same way again. No doubt she said what, up to this time, was the honest truth, that there had been no wrong to Robert, in thought

or word. It was nothing, she said, but the riding which beguiled her into doing what she now acknowledged to have been both foolish and wrong. It was the beautiful horse, and her own being dead—and it came to the door saddled—and the groom waited—and her habit fitted so well—and——

“Nonsense!” said Robert.

But while he said this, two soft arms were clinging closely round his neck, a warm cheek was pressed against his own, and, more than all, tears—actual tears were trickling down from those eyes that looked so lovely when they wept—down upon his forehead, and softening the stern man within, until at last he spread out his own strong arms, and took the penitent to his heart again, and loved her even better than before.

Bessy told all, or nearly all. She said nothing about looks, and smiles, and pleasant

flatteries, because she was accustomed to receive such from almost all men; and up to this period, she honestly believed that Captain Gordon had no more serious meaning in what he said to her than others had. This indeed was clear enough. And yet there was a secret charm in his manner, which to Bessy was so different from the manner of all the men she was acquainted with, that from this very fact he was a dangerous companion for her, and she ought to have known that he was. Perhaps she did know it, for she now assured Robert, with the most earnest declarations, that the fault she had committed should be the last of its kind in all her life. He might trust her—indeed he might! She was only too sorry—indeed she hated and despised herself, that, while he was working and slaving for her, she could be amusing herself in idleness and folly.

“In worse than that !” said Robert. “You know what I mean. I am not jealous. I would not stoop to be jealous of any man. But I declare to you solemnly this night, Bessy, as we two stand here, with God’s eye alone beholding us, that if ever you knowingly give me cause to feel again as I have felt this day, I will tear you away from my heart as a man would tear away a serpent, and you shall be to me from that time no more than any other woman. Do you hear my vow, Bessy? Do you understand it?”

Bessy heard, but to understand it was a different matter. Life had been to her up to this time little more than play. She had never heard any man speak as Robert did just then. His solemn manner, the stillness and the loneliness of the place conspired to frighten her, and she was creeping closer to his side, as if for safety and protection.

But Robert held her from him. "Do you understand me, Bessy?" he said again. "You must answer me as a true woman. You must speak as solemnly as I have done. What do you say?"

"I give you my promise faithfully," said Bessy. "But do let us go. This place is so still, and awful, I cannot bear it. You will come home with me, Robert, won't you? I dare not go alone."

Robert willingly went home with his cousin, but he felt a little disappointed that she did not feel more deeply the grave import of what he had been saying to her. "Poor girl," said he to himself, as he returned home at a later hour, "she has scarcely learned to think yet—scarcely begun to feel. But still we shall be happy together. There cannot be the shadow of a doubt about that."

CHAPTER IV.

MR. SPINK the lawyer was not the most attractive of men in the capacity of lover. He was a widower, as he described himself, "without encumbrances," and he had a trick of talking perpetually of the late dear "partner of his bosom." He had been what he considered the best and the tenderest of husbands, and therefore was ready, in the presence of any woman, or man either, to appeal to the past as a guarantee for the future.

In the company of Alice Gray he was particularly addicted to this style of conversation, and she was not ignorant of its meaning, though for some time she allowed it to go on without evincing any sign that she so much

as heard it, still less understood what it was intended to convey. At length, however, it became so intolerable to her, accompanied as it was with corresponding looks, and other indications, that she began to think almost any termination would be better to bear than this man's confident assumption that he was himself altogether agreeable to her, and that she was inevitably destined to enjoy the second partnership in what he was pleased to call his "bo-som."

Some of her friends, too, and Robert especially, were very teasing and vexatious to Alice on this subject. Her brother was perpetually rallying her upon the conquest she had made. To both sister and brother it was no more than a ridiculous kind of joke, not for a moment to be thought of seriously; and therefore, Alice thought, the more easily brought to a decided conclusion.

A joke they called it, but they little knew what belonged to that grim joke, or they would not have made themselves so merry over it as they did sometimes; for Robert liked nothing better in the way of fun than to see his sister put "upon her metal," as he called it, and the man's insolent self-assumption in her presence was becoming every day more disgusting to her. Yet how unreasonable in her to complain of that, her brother often told her; seeing that the man estimated himself first in the whole universe, how could he pay her greater honour than by giving her the second place?

And so the two went playfully on, until, as already said, Alice came to the conclusion that it would be a saving of trouble and vexation to let the man speak his mind, and so have done with the whole matter. That a few words decidedly spoken would be quite

sufficient to bring about this happy result, she entertained no manner of doubt. And Alice *could* speak decidedly enough, when she chose. She knew her power in this way. It was a sort of gift she had, beyond most women. When her mind was made up on any point, and she wished it to be so understood that it was so, there was no hesitation on her part—no dallying with the matter in hand—no evasion—all was clear as the day with her, and was made clear to others in a very short space of time.

It had occurred to Alice more than once, that her father wished this ridiculous affair brought to a conclusion, else why did he so often leave the room for a considerable length of time when Mr. Spink was their guest, and when she herself was almost compelled by ordinary civility to remain with him.

On one of these occasions, then, Alice pur-

posely forebore to ward off the hateful subject, as her custom hitherto had been. Instead of talking rapidly on any topic which might arise, so as scarcely to give her companion time to speak, she now sat silent, looking intently on her work ; for while she waited as a person waits for unwelcome tidings, she could not look into the man's face in anticipation of what he might be absurd enough to say. The most self-complacent man would have been unable to construe her manner into anything like a wish that he should speak. Alice only waited, and she despised herself while she did so.

A man who has lived long with a gracious purpose in his mind, who has cherished that purpose as a peculiar mark of favour towards one individual, and who has learned to estimate that individual the more highly as the recipient of such favour, does not take

very graciously the casting back of the favour in his face by that same distinguished and highly-privileged person.

The shock which Mr. Spink would have experienced on Alice's prompt and most decided refusal of his offer was greatly mitigated by his not believing that she meant what she said. In short, it was to him impossible that she should mean it. Alice was youthful, and inexperienced, he said to himself, and girls were shy. It looked well to see a modest young woman not jump at once at an offer—and such an offer! He admired her self-control that she could so far restrain her feelings. He looked upon her behaviour with high approval. He had always thought well of her, but now he felt more than ever confirmed in the wisdom and prudence of his choice.

Alice had never been so strongly convinced before of the nature of the material she had

to deal with in her admirer. So thick and impervious was his coating of self-sufficiency, that she could not make the man believe her words ; and she was beginning to feel irritated almost beyond endurance, only that she was kept from showing her anger by that innate self-respect which prevents some people from letting themselves down in the presence of their inferiors.

For some time Mr. Spink went on expatiating upon the advantages he was offering to Alice's acceptance, along with himself, that crowning gem of priceless value ; and all as if the matter was satisfactorily settled between them. He was telling her of his town home in York, his way of living, what he ate and what he drank, and how he should indulge her taste in that way. Through all which Alice broke in, whenever there was a pause, with fresh assurances that she was quite in

earnest, and never meant to be his wife ; while each time that she did so, he only gave her a soft pat on the hand or shoulder, saying, “ Well, well, my dear,” and then he went on as before, with the same smooth flow of pleasant promises, and substantial estimates of future prosperity, in which she was to be the favoured partaker with himself.

It is scarcely necessary to say, that this estimate included things hateful to Alice, even to hear casually mentioned—how much more odious, then, to hear them associated with herself and him. At length her patience came to an end ; and springing up from her seat, she said, with a tone and manner impossible to be mistaken,

“ Mr. Spink, you are wasting words and time. I tell you, once for all, that I never will be your wife, and that, for the best of all reasons—because I have no manner of liking for you,

and never could have under any circumstances. Don't try my patience further. You will only compel me to be rude, and I do not wish to be so in my father's house."

"My dear young woman!" said the astounded suitor, and he really looked as if some dawn of a misgiving was shooting athwart his beclouded mind. "My dear young woman," he repeated soothingly, and would have taken her hand, but Alice snatched it away, and stood at a greater distance, looking very stern and decided.

"Let this foolish matter rest now and for ever," she said. "As a woman I have a right to insist that you never mention it to me again."

These words were spoken rather grandly, and Alice was about to leave the room, when she felt her arm grasped forcibly by the man who, a moment before, appeared so bland and

smooth, and herself almost dragged back again from the door into the middle of the room. Here she was compelled to listen to very different language from that which had been so wearying to her patience, so disgusting to her taste.

“Young woman,” said Mr. Spink, and he spoke in tones very unlike those to which Alice had been listening—“Young woman,” he repeated, “do you know what you are doing?”

“I know perfectly well,” Alice replied, not at all daunted by the threatening manner of the man, who still held her by the arm, but held her with no tenderness in his grasp.

In fact, Mr. Spink, usually so calm, was in a desperate passion just then. The shock to his self-complacency had been too much for his habitual prudence, and it became evident that his professed attachment to Alice was not

of a kind to prevent his revenging himself upon her for the insult she had dared to put upon him, in rejecting his offer and opposing his will. If his love was odious, he seemed determined to make his anger terrible. But Alice felt no fear, nor was she disposed in any way to make concessions. What had she to fear from such a man as that?

In all probability her countenance expressed more strongly than her words what was passing in her mind—that a flash of scorn, or a look of defiance might escape from her eyes as she stood confronting the man who, so recently a suitor for her hand, looked now as if suddenly converted into a bitter and implacable enemy.

“I shall never alter my decision,” said Alice. “You may as well let me go.”

“You refuse, then—you absolutely refuse to be my wife?”

“I do—now and for ever. I shall never change in that.”

“Then I have something to tell you,” said the man. “Sit down, and listen to me, for it concerns you all as a family, and cannot be told in a few words.”

Alice sat down, scarcely conscious of what she was doing, for this mention of her family filled her with alarm. So long as the conversation was not to be about love, or marriage, she was rather anxious than otherwise to hear it, for she believed this man to be the depository of many of her father's secrets. But she was not so bold now as before, and the fact that he *could* make her feel—*could* make her tremble, appeared to stimulate the speaker to say more than he would have allowed himself to divulge under ordinary circumstances.

The position in which the man put himself while telling his strange story rendered it

almost impossible to sit still under the infliction ; for, drawing his chair very near, he leaned over her, bringing his face so close that she could absolutely feel his breath upon her cheek ; and thus he reminded her forcibly of some animal about to devour its prey. But his words soon struck her still, and dumb, and cold, so that she would scarcely have felt that odious face had it actually touched her own. He spoke in deep deliberate tones, his eyes fixed steadily all the while on her half-averted face. There was a kind of secret relish lurking in what he said, and evident in his manner of saying it. He seemed to prolong the words as he uttered them, because they were pleasant to his taste.

To repeat all the facts which the lawyer told, would be nothing without his manner of putting them forth. The long story was related with positive torture to Alice, in all its

length. The substance of it was, that her father was completely in the man's power as regarded every item of his property; that he had borrowed and borrowed, until the old hereditary farm and homestead of Applegarth was mortgaged almost to the full amount of its value; that he had but to say the word, and Mr. Gray was a penniless and ruined man; but that all might yet be adjusted, and the worst calamity averted, by Alice consenting to become his wife. In that case their residence would be for the summer at the Poplars, for the winter in York; but eventually on her father's death, Alice would again be the mistress of Applegarth, where, with her honoured and respected husband, she was to spend the remainder of her life.

“And what if I don't marry you?” asked Alice, when she had listened to the story up to this point.

"In that case I make you all beggars, have your father sold up, and you quit the place for ever."

"For the workhouse?" said Alice, by way of filling up the measure of his cruel spite.

"Yes, for the workhouse—if you prefer that to being my wife."

"I do prefer it," was her cold and deliberate reply.

"Very well," said Mr. Spink, letting go her arm and rising from his chair. "That matter is settled, then."

A silence ensued, and still Alice did not leave the room, for now the conversation was diverted in some degree from herself, she wanted to obtain all the information available from the present opening.

"And when," she said, "is all this to take place?"

“Very soon—at least, sooner than you will be prepared for.”

“What do you mean by soon? In a month, or a year? I only want to know, because of keeping the matter secret, or acting upon it at once.”

Alice's coolness of manner was more than Mr. Spink had calculated upon. It seemed to embarrass him, and endanger his plans. He grew calm, and wary again, like his former self, while he replied—

“I am no advocate for rash movements. I have no wish to be hasty with Mr. Gray. I have borne the burden of his affairs so long that, as regards myself, I might, perhaps, be induced to wait twelve months or so. But the end is sure, Miss Gray. It will come down upon you as a family; there is no escape from it, unless—unless——”

And he paused, and looking into her face,

made a little attempt at a smile, intending to be sweet.

“Not one word of that,” said Alice, raising her hand authoritatively. “Speak to the point. I ask you if there are reasons—no matter whom they concern—if there are reasons why this great exposure and wreck should not be accomplished now?”

“There are such reasons.”

“Very well,” said Alice, “then our conversation is at an end.”

“I believe it is,” said Mr. Spink, looking at his watch.

But still he hesitated, and though he stepped softly before Alice to open the door for her, he kept it in his hands, so that she could not pass, until he found words to speak again.

“I believe,” he said very gently, and with some hesitation—“I believe, Miss Gray, I

may have gone a little too far—may have spoken somewhat hastily—a thing quite unusual with me. Man is not always his own master. The enemy is ever on the watch, and the saints are peculiarly the objects of his desire. I may—yes, I *may* have gone too far. Indeed, I have reason to fear that I have betrayed too much. But the flesh is weak, Miss Gray—the flesh is weak, and the enemy goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

“Do you mean,” said Alice, growing impatient, “that what you have said to me about my father’s affairs must be kept secret?”

“I do. It would be better things should remain as they were before I spoke, at least for a time. May I depend upon you for this?”

“So far as it may be for my father’s good

that I should be silent, you may entirely depend upon me."

Mr. Spink looked thoughtful and perplexed. In the irritation of a moment he had rashly betrayed what he could not now recall. He had not only lost all chance of the wife he had been calculating upon as already his own, but he had put, what he would now have called rather an *unfriendly* party, in possession of facts which were by no means ripe for disclosure. In common parlance, he had "made a fool of himself." In his own phraseology "the enemy had been permitted to prevail against him." How was he to get out of his dilemma?—how make all sure again as it was before? He now mistrusted the disposition and temper of the woman with whom he had to do, at least in relation to himself, and that went a long way towards including all things. Generally speaking, he was not unacquainted

with the art of "coming round" people, as he would have called it; but this woman was a complete puzzle to him. What could he do? Under the pressure of so new and unlooked-for a difficulty, the man of law could only betake himself to the gospel, and repeat again such texts as he considered most applicable to his present case.

To Alice it made very little difference just then in what way the matter was put. Possibly she would have preferred, in the present instance, the religious to the legal form, as hanging most loosely upon the question. But the bare facts themselves were of such magnitude and importance, as entirely to occupy her thoughts, and she paid so little attention to what the lawyer was saying, as scarcely to bid him a courteous good-bye, when at last he withdrew his hand from the door and allowed her to pass out.

When Alice reached her own room, to which she flew without delay, then was the time to collect her thoughts—then was the time really to think—then was the time to recall the past, to put together things which had appeared unaccountable and disjointed, and to compress them into present reality, and then—more difficult yet—more urgent than all, it was the time to plan for the future.

It was impossible but that Alice should do as we all do at such times, exclaim now and then with a sudden burst of indignation against the madness and folly which had brought things to such a pass. Indeed the wonder, the absolute amazement which she felt in thinking of her father's infatuation was such as she could not shake off, and which seemed for awhile to overpower all other feelings. The bare facts of the case were so entirely unaccountable to her—that a sane man

should entangle himself to that extent, making his whole life wretched and false, for the sake of appearing to be a man of substance, when he was but a man of straw—this fact alone stood out before her mental view, and hid for a time all others in the shadow of its mysterious and incomprehensible darkness.

Alice forgot that her father's infatuation was but another phase of that ruling passion under which mankind, and womankind, too, are struggling all the world over, to *appear* something which they are not. She forgot that in every department of human experience—in money transactions—in literature—in art—alas! and in religion, too, there is ever the same temptation at hand—ever the same natural tendency lurking within—and ever the same liability to fall. Once entangled in this maze, there would seem ever the same difficulty in breaking loose, and the same impulse

to go on and on, with accelerated force and speed—whither? Yes, whither? That was what Alice was asking herself now. That was the question most urgently demanded to be answered.

“We must save my poor father if we can,” was her first and last resolve.

All else might be left; for why, Alice thought, should she distract her mind about the how and the why of this strange state of things? So she struggled hard to put away all other thoughts, and to look directly at what was best to be done for her father, and, indeed, for them all as a family.

To her brother Robert, as to a never-failing rock of strength and safety, Alice went as soon as she could sufficiently command herself. She preferred talking to him away from her father's roof, where they might feel more entirely alone; and she found him in his own

empty house at Homefield, superintending some of the finishing touches of the workmen, now about to be dismissed, the house being nearly ready for its last garniture of paint and paper.

“Robert,” said Alice, “come out into the field with me, or send these workmen away.”

Her brother looked at his watch, and, seeing that it was too early for the men to leave, he put on his hat and went out with his sister, for he saw by her manner that something urgent was on her mind.

With an instinctive sense of the necessity of freedom from all intrusion, they walked away from the walls and hedges, along a path which led right through the middle of a grass field, and here they paused, or rather paced slowly backwards and forwards, while Alice told her tale.

Robert Gray was scarcely less astonished

than his sister had been, for although he had been closely associated with his father in the bare details of his business, he had shared but little of his confidence. The practical routine of the farm-work and occupation had for some time been under his especial oversight, but with his father's sales and purchases, or any of his money speculations, he had never had anything to do; and of all people in the world, his single-hearted, straightforward son was, perhaps, the last whom Mr. Gray would have selected for the partner of his baseless, but ambitious, schemes. A few direct words from Robert were enough at any time to repel the confidence of his father. Hence the two never, of late years, could get on together—never were intimate—never were attached, as Robert sometimes feared, in the natural way of parent and child. This had often been the cause of deep regret to him as well as to his

sister, who had always counselled quietness on his part, and patient endurance, until things should be more fully explained. And Robert had tried hard at times to do his duty to his father; but patient endurance of what he could not understand, and did not approve, was a virtue rather difficult for him to practice, and he was glad, for other reasons besides those pertaining to his marriage, to make his escape from home, for the fear of his patience utterly failing was increasing every day.

Thus it was not only that the place was his own and Bessy's for the future, though that was much, but because it was a present refuge, that Robert came so often, and sat with a dim candle glimmering in those vacant rooms; for here he could think in peace, and here there was nothing to irritate him beyond the slow progress of the workmen, and their

blundering execution of his orders. Provocations of this kind he could bear as well as most men. They were no more to him to be vexed about than a cold east-wind, or sharp hail pelting in his face. But to suspect his father of unworthy acts and motives—that was intolerable; and never to be able to demand an explanation, either for love or duty, of those mysterious and apparently aimless transactions, which continually perplexed and disturbed his mind—this was what Robert had so long borne—borne to the utmost limit of endurance; and this it was, he told his sister, though he would not have made the same confession to any one else in the world, that now made him feel like a free and happy man when he could sit in a dreary room beside a fire of wood ashes, and call even that desolate place his own.

There was a perfect understanding, conse-

quently, between the brother and sister when they now talked over their father's business affairs in the middle of a wide field, with a cloudy sky above their heads, and the grey twilight of a winter's day closing around them. Now they referred back to many things which had sorely perplexed them at the time. Now they understood much which had been entirely inexplicable to them before. And yet, in spite of all, they could not take in any clear idea of their father's infatuation, because they were both so differently constituted themselves; and again and again, during the course of their conversation, Robert stopped, and absolutely stamped with indignation, to think of the unmitigated folly which had brought them all, as he said, "to beggary and ruin."

Alice herself had felt the same impatience, and something like the same indignation, before

she talked with her brother ; but his violence seemed now to have the effect of making her more calm, and she even argued and pleaded on behalf of her father, that perhaps he had not quite known what he was doing, and might never have intended to go so far ; just as women will plead and argue sometimes where their affections are concerned. To all which Robert only answered that his father *should* have known, and *must* have intended to do what he had done. So that Alice found it wisest to lay down her weapons of defence for the present. They were not very powerful weapons, and her unskilful use of them only increased her brother's righteous indignation.

It was impossible, however, for the brother and sister, although they looked at their trouble in almost every point of view, and talked it over in many of its bearings, and

probable results, to arrive at any definite conclusion there and then, as to what course it would be best for them to pursue. That Alice ought to see her father, and talk with him freely, was Robert's decided opinion. For him to speak, he said, would do more harm than good; and perhaps he was right in this. But Alice had a dutiful and legitimate plea for speaking, in what had just transpired between her and Mr. Spink.

And here, in spite of himself—in spite of the almost intolerable vexation he was enduring, Robert burst into a loud and uncontrollable fit of laughter. The very grotesqueness of this affair, mixed up, as it was, with so much that was grave and miserable, made him laugh the more—as people laugh sometimes because they must do something, and they will not allow themselves to cry. In vain Alice begged her brother to be quiet, and yet

she herself threw in ever and anon more food for laughter, by describing some of the strange details of the interview which had led to still more strange disclosures.

“I think,” said Robert, when his laughter had a little abated—“I think one good kick, such as I could have administered, would have settled him, and I should feel all the better now if that fellow had had his deserts. But, Alice, you must see my father—you must speak home to him. Don’t flinch from the truth. If he should be angry with you, you know he will live to thank you, and if not in this world, he will in the next. Never fear, Alice. You are a good, brave girl! You can do what nobody else can. I only wish I was half as good as you.”

And Robert drew his sister to his side, clasping her in his fond brotherly arms, and

pressing a kiss upon her cheek ; and Alice promised, with an aching heart, that she would see her father, and do the best she could.

CHAPTER V.

THE duty which Alice had undertaken was not so easily performed as might have been anticipated. Her father was long closeted with the lawyer on the evening of the day just described, and early the next morning Mr. Gray accompanied his guest to York. On his return he was closely engaged with papers and account books ; so much so, that it would have been unreasonable to interrupt him by demanding his attention to any other subject. Besides this, Alice thought her father appeared more than usually harassed, as well as deeply absorbed—rather like a man who might be preparing for some crisis in his affairs, to which he looked forward with more anxiety than

satisfaction. Through the whole evening, and late into the night, she could hear him still at work in his private room, and in the morning she observed that the long candle she was accustomed to provide for him was almost entirely consumed.

While anxiously waiting in this manner through several successive days, Alice was startled one morning by the sight of Captain Gordon's groom alighting at the door; and, feeling some curiosity about his errand, she waited for the girl who had answered his summons, to ascertain what she brought back into the house. It was a letter for Mr. Gray.

"Some farming matter, no doubt," said Alice to herself, as she still thoughtfully turned the letter over and over in her hand. Her father had dropped a hint on one occasion that Captain Gordon wanted to see him

about a piece of land. And now, thought Alice, he will most likely want to see him again: So she took the letter into her father's private room, and placed it on his table, where he would be sure to see it on first coming in.

Mr. Gray, who had gone out early, came home that day complaining of his head, and Alice was shocked to see how pale and haggard he looked. Certainly that was no time to rouse him up to a fresh sense of his perilous and responsible position. Indeed, Alice thought this was exactly what he was himself realising, for he seemed to be completely borne down by some load, the weight of which he was scarcely able to bear. It was impossible for her not to think how fruitless and vain was all this misery which her father had brought upon himself, and how happy the family might all have been with

honest toil, and even poverty, had they never been involved in these endless and degrading entanglements.

Thinking, very naturally, that if her father was indisposed, he would remain more at home, and would for awhile put his business matters aside, Alice resolved that then she would speak. In the meantime, she regarded him with anxious solicitude, and allowed no little act of kindness or duty to remain undone, by which she might assure him of her tender and filial care. In spite of all she could do, however, there appeared no opening for her to speak—no relaxation on her father's part from that stern impenetrable gloom in which he had lately wrapped himself, as if to ward off all familiar approach.

Alice could scarcely believe it possible that her rejection of the absurd proposals of Mr. Spink should have been unwelcome to her

father, yet something more than usual had evidently displeased him, and something, too, in which she was herself concerned, for towards her in particular his manner was distant and forbidding.

“I shall never know the contents of that letter,” thought Alice, “nor anything else that I want to know, while he remains in this mood.” But whilst she neglected none of her duties, still she left nothing undone which might in any way minister to her father’s comfort ; and still he remained silent, incomprehensible, and wholly occupied, as it appeared, in his own business and his own thoughts.

Towards the close of the day on which Mr. Gray returned home complaining of his head, Alice sat thinking alone, until she felt persuaded that her father was more indisposed than he liked to confess ; and she was sorry

to hear him ask for his tall candle, and prepare as usual for retiring to his private room. Alice ventured to ask him if he did not think he had better go to bed and rest, but Mr. Gray coolly replied that he had business that night requiring his close attention, but perhaps he should not be late. And again there was the accustomed indication of steady work in her father's room ; now and then the movement of a chair, the opening and shutting of drawers, or the jingle of keys, all which Alice could hear, whether she sat in the parlour, which was only separated from her father's room by a panelled wall, or in her own chamber immediately above.

Alice sat at her work, listening to these sounds until about the usual time for the quiet household to retire to rest, when a violent ringing of her father's bell startled her from her occupation, and she flew to his door,

but opened it very gently, as was her habit on entering that room.

Mr. Gray was seated in his accustomed place, leaning back in his arm-chair, with a strange abstracted look about his eyes, and Alice thought for a moment he was quite insensible. But he had still power to speak, though faintly, and in broken sentences to explain that a "strange feeling—a giddiness in the head—something," he said, and then, while the words were on his lips, he lost both sight and speech, and it became but too evident that some attack of an alarming nature had seized him, arresting for awhile both sense and motion.

On first coming into the room, Alice had had the presence of mind to ring for assistance, and soon both Robert and old Molly came to her help. A messenger was despatched for medical aid, while every available

restorative was applied, with little apparent effect, until the patient had been carefully removed to his own bed, when signs of returning to consciousness afforded some hope that the attack had been little more than an ordinary fainting fit.

In a short time after his removal Mr. Gray regained his senses, and with them the power to recall what he had been doing when the attack of giddiness came on.

“Alice,” he said, calling his daughter to his bed-side, “go down into my room and lock the desk, and bring the key to me. You can then lock the door, when you come out of the room, and bring me that key also.”

Glad to do anything to set her father’s mind at rest, Alice hastened down to his private-room to execute the little commission entrusted to her. On looking round at the

accumulation of papers and parchments heaped upon his table, she did not wonder either that his head should have become confused, or that he should wish the door of the room to be secured. With the things on the table Alice did not meddle. Her business was with the desk. In attempting to turn the key, she found some difficulty with the lock, and thinking it most likely that some papers were in the way, she lifted up the lid so high as to see that all was clear. As she did so, an open letter lay before her in the desk, as if slipped in hastily, perhaps to be referred to again. The handwriting of the letter was perfectly familiar to her—she knew it only too well. It was Captain Gordon's, and, never dreaming there could be a secret between him and her father, Alice paused a moment, while her eye glanced over the open page.

Could it be real that which Alice saw,

and read, or did she dream? A sudden horror seized her, and she read the letter through. It was short and clear—very gentlemanly, but very decided. It contained a polite but absolute refusal to lend a large sum of money to Mr. Gray, and the letter was so worded as to leave no doubt that the loan had been urgently solicited.

“Have we fallen so low as this!” said Alice, as she shut down the desk and turned the key, while a burning blush of mingled shame and indignation overspread her face. Nor did the agonising humiliation of that moment abate after a little time had been given to reflection—a little time Alice had felt that she must take, for she was absolutely struck down, and could only clasp her hands and say, “Anything but this!”

For a few moments every thought about her father’s present situation was swallowed

up in this intolerable feeling of degradation—a feeling which could not have been so acute from any other quarter ; and while she dwelt upon the thought, her very being seemed to shrink and shiver under it. Under all other circumstances Alice felt that she could have held up her head like an honest woman, as she was. But here !—and then to look that man in the face, as she must !—Captain Gordon of all men in the world ! Alice stamped her foot involuntarily on the ground with a craving, oh ! how earnest, that the letter, and the whole transaction, could be so stamped out from all remembrance—from all existence now and for ever.

Even from an agony like this people must gather themselves up, and go about their ordinary business ; and Alice's business just now was something more than ordinary, it was very urgent, and alarming. So turning the key in the

door of that now hateful room—turning it with a secret wish that she could so enclose within four walls the grievous shame now fallen upon herself and her family, she retraced her steps to her father's chamber, having been absent only a few minutes, though it seemed to her an age.

In that short space of time a change had taken place in the patient, such as the doctor who was now present said was to be expected. Mr. Gray was restless, heated, and disposed to be talkative; in this respect so unlike himself, that those who observed the change became seriously alarmed. The doctor reassured them as far as he could, recommended the most perfect quiet, and then went his way, having, as he said, another case requiring his attention.

The brother and sister remained with their father all through the night, keeping silent

watch in the darkened room, scarcely uttering a whisper to each other, while the patient went rambling on about all sorts of disjointed things, from which, however, it was not difficult for those who watched to disentangle certain allusions, and even shreds of information, which immediately wove themselves in, not very pleasantly, with what they had more than half suspected, and greatly feared before.

To judge from the incoherent ramblings of the patient, it would seem as if his daughter's refusal to be the wife of her father's seeming friend, and only confidant, had been the death-blow of his hopes. It seemed, too, as if since then a sort of difference or quarrel had taken the place of their former intimacy. And yet the poor stricken man, amongst his many strange expressions, appeared sometimes to be pleading with his enemy to spare him—to have

patience with him, and wait yet a little longer. And then he whispered impressively something about Alice, and how to please and win her, with other maudlin talk, which more than all proved difficult for Alice to endure, though all was inexpressibly painful and embarrassing.

And still the brother and sister sat, and watched, and listened, in almost unbroken silence, throughout the whole of that long night. Only now and then an expressive look flashed out some sudden intelligence mutually understood ; or sometimes the hand of Alice stole gently into her brother's, or she laid her head and hid her face upon his shoulder, as if she could bear no more. But neither of them yielded to their own emotions. Alice never, on any occasion, gave way to womanly weeping, nor did her brother utter one word of that manly indignation which it

was impossible for him not to feel. It was a long night of patient endurance to both—a night never to be forgotten by either.

Before morning dawned the patient had become more calm, and the distressing restlessness of the night at last gave place to something like natural sleep. The doctor, on his arrival, gave an encouraging opinion of the general state of things; and the patient watchers again took heart. If by any means a relapse could be prevented, they were assured that all might be well; but a relapse, the doctor said, would, in all probability, be attended with paralytic symptoms; and for that reason all disturbance of the brain must be guarded against with the utmost care.

Never was there a quieter or more careful nurse than Alice. She had acquired her skill in this office while attending on a very different patient; and one hard portion of

her present task was, that she had to endure the unavoidable recurrence to her own mind of those past scenes in a sick chamber beneath the same roof, which were stamped upon her mind with a freshness and force never to be obliterated or forgotten.

“And what,” Alice asked herself, “was Captain Gordon thinking of them now?—of her?—of all her family? He was thinking them a greedy, base, money-seeking set of creatures, strangers to all the high principles of integrity and honour.” This idea was her torment. In spite of the difference in their habits of life, in spite of much that she had been made secretly to feel, she had always, until the late discovery of her father’s transactions with Captain Gordon, held herself his equal; nor had there been anything in the nature of their intercourse to make her feel otherwise. It suited well with that

independence of disposition which Alice shared equally with her brother, that Captain Gordon should have been, in relation to them, the obliged party ; and while she would have been the last to speak of such obligation, she had felt a secret pride that it was so. Now the case was reversed. The whole foundation of her self-complacency was overthrown ; and instead of that innate sense of personal dignity to which, as a favoured daughter, Alice considered herself as much entitled as if she had been a duchess, there was nothing left but meanness, and shame, and utter abasement. It was in vain to attempt to close her eyes to the worst aspect of the case. What her father had done, looked exactly as if he thought that his past hospitality to Captain Gordon entitled him to ask the loan of a sum of money from him rather than from any other man.

Little did Alice know of her father's habitual transactions while she brooded over this galling and bitter truth. Little did she know how few persons there were within the range of his acquaintance of whom Mr. Gray had not attempted to borrow money; for what will a man not do when he has brought himself, by a long course of borrowing, to think that other people's money is as available to him as if it were his own? Mr. Gray, to do him justice, had no thought of any obligation on the part of Captain Gordon in what he had done. The weak, or, rather, faulty points of his character, lay in a direction altogether different from that; but he had been keenly alive to the information spread throughout the neighbourhood that the Captain had lately come into possession of what the people called a fortune, and he seized what he considered a golden opportunity to avail himself

of a portion of this fortune for his own most urgent need.

The absolute quiet insisted upon by the doctor appeared to Alice rather an extreme precaution ; for, in the course of a few days, Mr. Gray seemed to have regained something like his usual state of health. Still, his medical attendant was so stringent in the restrictions which he imposed, that Alice willingly submitted, as a matter of duty, and was even most exact in enforcing the rule for which she did not herself see any absolute necessity.

While Alice keeps her faithful watch beside her father, while Robert as faithfully pursues his now accumulating occupations, which, with the coming of another year, leave him but little time before the momentous event of his marriage, we will take a slight survey of things behind the scenes ; such being the

privilege of those who weave a story out of material of their own selecting.

With the character of Captain Gordon we have little to do, excepting so far as it interferes with the thread of our simple narrative. He was, probably, neither better nor worse than thousands of men who live and die without leaving the world either much the better or much the worse for their having found a place in it. In brief phraseology, he was a handsome and somewhat polished man, with a great amount of unoccupied time just now upon his hands. The circumstances of his early life had been anything but favourable to the moral training of his character; yet he was neither depraved nor unamiable, as men go. Perhaps he had never been so nearly attaining to something like moral worth, as on his first recovery from the illness caused by his accident. Perhaps he never met—never

could meet with anyone so likely as the kind nurse of that long illness to foster what was solid and good in his character ; or, in other words, to make a man of him, and a worthy man too. Unlike as were the patient and nurse in all their associations of life, as well as in their natural characters, there was yet a certain kind of community of thought and feeling between them for the time being, which left an impress not easily effaced.

And who knows but that we each bring into the world with us this union of nature and feeling with some other being, if we could but find and recognise our second self? Such union is not resemblance—rather the reverse. It has little to do with thinking and feeling in the same groove. Perhaps it more resembles the power of supplying in one character exactly what the other most wants.

In the case with which we have to do, the

temporary union of thought and feeling appeared to be so entirely accidental, that it was the more easily thrown off by the one who went out into the world again to play his part there ; and, of course, to disentangle himself as soon as possible from the tender threads of that transient bondage which his illness, as he soon persuaded himself, had been the accidental means of imposing.

Then came that unlooked-for piece of good fortune—the inheritance of no mean amount of property. And then Captain Gordon looked around him, and began to rejoice in his freedom, as well as independence—began, in all probability, to think what a simpleton he had been to offer himself a willing slave to the thrall of a simple country maiden ; or, as is quite possible, began to wish that Alice Gray had been other than she was, in order

that she might still have shared with becoming grace his altered fortunes.

However this might be, there is no manner of doubt but Captain Gordon heartily rejoiced in his freedom—rejoiced that Alice had had the firmness and good sense to refuse the offer of any serious engagement with himself. “It was all,” he said to himself, “the folly and weakness resulting from long illness which had made him think of Alice as he did. He had been dependent on her kindness, and she was very kind—that he remembered ; a capital nurse, and that also he remembered. But a man wants something different from a nurse—especially a gentleman.” And so again and again he congratulated himself upon the fact that, as a point of honour, he was entirely exonerated by Alice’s own rejection of his proposals, and by her decided refusal to enter into any engagement for the future.

What Captain Gordon most feared to encounter was some reference, or allusion on her part, to what had once taken place between them. He feared, also, her disappointment in not finding the subject revived. He feared her depression of spirits—her tenderness manifested in looks, if not in words. He feared a thousand things on Alice's part, which she would have died rather than be guilty of. And when he met her again, a cheerful, self-possessed, and self-supported woman, with every outward manifestation of being not only whole-hearted, but even "fancy free," whatever he might suffer in his vanity as a man, he could not but exult in his liberation from what might have been rather an irksome bondage under his present altered circumstances.

Brave soldier as he might have been on the field of battle, Captain Gordon could not help

flinching a little at first, under the steady eye of the woman into whose power he had once so entirely thrown himself. It had, perhaps, never entered into his mind to believe that any woman could so frankly, and with such apparent willingness, relinquish the hold which Alice once had for a brief dreaming time upon his affections. But the fact was plain before him. By neither word nor look—by neither playful nor yet spiteful allusion to their past intercourse, did Alice betray that she had felt for him more than she would have felt for any ordinary person thrown by accident upon her kindness. Nay, so complete was her self-command, aided no doubt a little by the conviction that *he* wanted to ignore his past weakness, that she could even allude to the hurts which her own hands had dressed, and specify the distinct maladies which had so long retarded his perfect restoration to health.

It is not to be denied that Alice did much of this in a kind of defiance, to show that she *could* do it—that the past was not hid from her by a veil which she was unable to lift. She *did* lift it, and that without apparent flinching, though she willingly let it down again, to hide what was behind, glad if she could hide it for ever.

Through the severe ordeal of meeting again with Captain Gordon, and meeting on such altered terms, Alice Gray had now borne herself well and bravely, betraying no pique at his manner towards herself, and showing, neither by word nor sign, that she so much as remembered what had been most interesting in their previous intercourse. Hence it was, perhaps, that Captain Gordon, who scarcely had at any time been equal to the right understanding of a character like hers, felt himself entirely, and very pleasantly, a free

man again. It is true his vanity was not flattered. It is true he was at times a little piqued, and vexed, and disposed to revenge himself by acting the same part over again ; and perhaps he would have understood Alice better, and his own deserts also, had he made this experiment. But from this project he was diverted, for there had come in his way a far more attractive object just now, in the person of her cousin Bessy ; and whatever he might want in the way of amusement for his spare moments, he could find in half an hour's badinage with this, as he called her, "splendid creature."

And now, once for all, as Alice sits watching beside her father, industriously stitching away at the table linen in preparation for the new establishment, let us glance for a moment at the present state of things existing between Captain Gordon and Bessy, the fair amazon,

as he was also pleased to designate his present favourite.

Up to this time Bessy had told Robert the truth, if not the whole truth, in her penitent confessions. She had not described to him the familiar jesting intercourse which formed the staple of that which existed between herself and the handsome soldier. But she had told him *the* truth in this—that there was nothing—absolutely nothing in her heart or conduct, as far as Captain Gordon was concerned, that he might not look into, and which she heartily wished he could. Up to this time Bessy could say truly that nothing but the most empty and idle chat occupied the hours which they spent together.

Up to that time ! But the country is dull to a young soldier living in a large and scantily-occupied house ; and there are days when a man can neither hunt nor shoot—and

Captain Gordon was no student, neither artist nor antiquarian—what was he to do? A little mischief is apt to offer itself under such circumstances, promising a taste of more racy flavour than the dry bread of every day common-place and monotony, and so verifying the words of the old hymn familiar to childhood, that “Satan finds, &c.”

A little mischief, a little anything, Captain Gordon began to think, would be preferable to that dead calm—that intolerable stagnation. Not that he actually planned the mischief with malice prepense. A bad man only could do that, and Captain Gordon, up to this time, was an idle rather than a bad man, according to the usual application of the epithet. Besides which, he was not only weary of the sameness of his present life, but a little piqued—just a little, that over the blooming amazon around whom his fancy just now

disported itself, any other man should assert his claims ; for Bessy had told him frankly that Robert had been grievously displeased about her riding with him, and consequently that she would never ride with him again. "She had pledged her word to Robert," she said, "and she would keep it."

Here, then, was the little choice bit of amusement which Captain Gordon had promised himself in riding, and perhaps flirting with Bessy, cut off from his reach by the assumed authority of a man with whom he had never been able to feel himself entirely at ease. Even during the time of his illness, the Captain had hated the obligation he was incurring, only so far as Robert was concerned. The rest of the family he did not care for ; but there was an inherent power of moral integrity and fearless straightforwardness about Robert which annoyed him, be-

cause it made him feel small in comparison with that strong, stalwart man ; and nobody likes to feel small under any circumstances.

So Captain Gordon took a fancy into his head that he would vex Robert, or, rather, that he would amuse himself, and accept the vexation of Robert as a necessary consequence. The young soldier cherished no real ill-will in his heart towards Robert, or any one else. Perhaps he was incapable of any such feeling ; but he sadly wanted amusement, and he liked to see that splendid girl radiant with laughter and fun, and he was sure she liked to laugh with him. Why should they not laugh together while they could ? Her lot, poor girl ! would be grave and dull enough soon, as it seemed to him ; and from the bottom of his heart, if he had had one, he would have pitied her.

So, what with dull days, during which he

could neither hunt nor shoot, what with Bessy and her radiant charms, and what with a little pique against Robert, Captain Gordon yielded not unfrequently to the impulse of the moment to ride over to Whinfield, to join Bessy in her walks, to help her to train a beautiful retriever which he had given her, and to do a thousand things which brought them together for the pleasant refreshment of a little idle talk ; while Robert was working from morning till night in the fields, and about the premises, now almost ready for Bessy's future home, never dreaming, unsuspecting, honest-hearted fellow that he was, but that his future wife was stitching at her linen, or superintending the more substantial preparations for their mutual sustenance in that home of peace.

CHAPTER VI.

THE chamber in which, by medical advice, Mr. Gray remained a prisoner, was not a very cheerful apartment. There were few subjects on which he and his daughter could now converse without restraint. All visitors had been forbidden, and Alice felt glad that it was so, otherwise it would have been impossible for her to maintain anything like the necessary quiet, and exemption from disturbance which her father's case required.

If anything could have convinced Alice more painfully than before that there was something wrong in her father's affairs, it would have been the number of persons who now came with anxious inquiries if they could see Mr. Gray

—“just see him for a moment,” some of them said ; and there were others who refused for a while to go away until they had seen him. Many of these were small farmers, cattle dealers, and persons accustomed to meet Mr. Gray at fairs and markets. But some were men whose acquaintance was based upon a religious foundation, and some were widows, or single women advanced in life, chiefly such as had been accustomed to listen to Mr. Gray’s spiritual exhortations, and to look up to him as friend and adviser, both for this world and the next.

Nothing could exceed the faith which this latter class of persons was accustomed to place in Mr. Gray. It seemed almost to reach up to infallibility, and it embraced their temporal as well as their spiritual affairs. Amongst this number there were those who now came to him in true simplicity and devotedness of

heart, to catch such blessed words as they thought might be dropping from his dying lips, for reports had gone abroad that Mr. Gray had had a stroke, and was not expected to recover—that he was lying, in fact, at the point of death.

By far the greater number of these visitors, however, had other and more mundane anxieties upon their minds, and these were the most difficult to get rid of. Alice could do nothing with them. Either they disbelieved her report, or they asserted their right to remain until they could see Mr. Gray, and of course each applicant wanted to see him first. Robert alone could deal with these people, and vexed as he was to see them, being in many cases but too well able to guess the cause of their importunity, he was obliged to tell them with a cheerful face that his father was really not so ill as had been

represented, and would soon be about again in his usual way. The doctor, too, was very consoling in his assurances, and him they were more willing to believe. So by degrees the press of visitors fell off, and Alice was relieved from the distress which their anxious and sometimes angry faces very naturally caused her.

The doctor who attended Mr. Gray was in some respects a great comfort to Alice. Whatever he might be in his professional skill, he was a man of undoubted cleverness in making a spare half-hour pass pleasantly with most of his patients. All the gossip of the neighbourhood was open to him, all the latest news, from whence he could select at will such items as were best adapted to the individual case before him. Thus he could report to one the price at which a neighbour had sold his short-horned cow ; to another,

the last political stratagem of Whig or Tory ; to a third, the small congregation of a rival Chapel, to a fourth the recent letting of a long empty house, to a fifth the untoward conduct of a neighbour's son, to a sixth the failure of a much condemned speculation ; and so on, through all the vicissitudes of human experience, whether favourable or otherwise, though, it must be confessed, that even in the sick chamber the otherwise predominated.

To Mr. Gray this very communicative gentleman came laden with intelligence about farms to let or sell, the supposed value of plots of available landed property, the success of certain money speculations, the breaking of banks, the failure of city houses, or any other monetary transaction of the day, and in all these Mr. Gray appeared to take a lively and never-failing interest.

“ By the way,” said Dr. Dixon, one

day while he sat beside his patient, "have you heard that another occupant is coming to the Hall?"

"What?" said Mr. Gray, "is it sold, or let?"

"Neither, I believe," replied the doctor, "but it seems my Lady Huntley has no fancy for our cold Yorkshire winds, and it is thought that she and Sir James are not likely to reside much in this part again."

"But the Hall?" asked Mr. Gray, endeavouring to keep his informant to the point.

"Well, you see," the doctor went on, in his accustomed round-about way—"you see in these newfangled manufacturing concerns there are all sorts—upstart gentlefolks, and those that are no gentlefolks at all. It is the baseness of this kind of trade that anybody can get up in it—that the meanest fellow,

perhaps one that a year since was oiling the wheels of their jennies, or whatever they call 'em, can to-day have his carriage and ride about like my lord."

"But what has that to do with the Hall?" Mr. Gray very naturally enquired.

"I will tell you, only give me time," said the doctor. "I was observing that all sorts of people spring up like mushrooms in these concerns, and like mushrooms they die down, and nobody misses them. Now, there is a young man that I knew something of as a boy—indeed, his mother was a sort of second cousin of my wife's—Staunton, they called him—Henry Staunton. I knew him when a boy, and in some way or other when his father died, he went into that factory, very likely as common hand, as likely as not. However, he was a clever lad, there's no manner of doubt about that, and he got among the chemicals—for you

know there's a wonderful deal of chemical trickery about their dyes, and things; and this lad being clever and ingenious, and born to the thing, as one may say, for his father was a chemist and druggist in Leeds, he gets on and on, until at last he stands right at the head of the chemical department; and now, one can hardly believe it, but it's true nevertheless—now, young as he is, he is taken in to be a partner—actually a partner with Huntley, Croskills, and Co. I say, Mr. Gray, one hardly *can* believe it.”

“ But the Hall ?” Mr. Gray repeated.

“ Oh ! yes, the Hall ! That's almost as wonderful as any part of the story. This lad—this Staunton, now comes, or is going to come, they tell me, to have a set of rooms at the Hall, and he brings his old mother to live there. Who would ever have believed it ? Why, the world seems to me to be get-

ting pretty much turned upside down."

"How so?" inquired Mr. Gray. "If Staunton is made a partner, I don't see why he should not live sometimes at the Hall, as well as any of the other partners, if they like it."

"Why, bless my life!" said the doctor, striking his hand upon the table, with a violence quite unsuited to a sick-room, "he hadn't sixpence to bless himself with when he went into the factory. I know that for a certainty."

"But," said Mr. Gray, "suppose others found the money, and he found the skill. I confess I don't see any harm in that."

"Harm!" said the doctor—"no harm, certainly; but it seems to me, as I said before, a strange turning of things upside down, for a penniless lad like that to come up here and live in a place like the Hall; though they do

say it's only a set of rather inferior rooms on the west side that he and his old mother are going to occupy. I declare, it's a good joke, and will serve me to laugh at for a month; to think of Dorothy—Dorothy, my wife's cousin—Dorothy Staunton, coming to live up at the Hall! Why, her husband was a chemist and druggist, and kept a little shop in Leeds!”

“And you think,” inquired Mr. Gray, “that this Staunton is actually a partner in the firm of Huntley and Croskill?”

“Why, yes,” replied the doctor, “in a certain way; he is junior partner, as they call him. Most likely he does all the dirty work, and comes off with but little pay. And those rooms at the Hall, on the west side, you know, are the worst rooms in the house. But it beats me,”—and the doctor laughed again—“it *does* beat me to think of Dorothy

Staunton coming up to live at the Hall! I wonder what that handsome young captain will think about it. He'll scarcely like to be hail-fellow-well-met with the Stauntons, I should think."

"He might be worse," observed Mr. Gray. "I never heard that the Captain was anything very great himself. When are these Stauntons coming, did you say?"

"In two or three weeks, as I understand. But I had better mind what I say, for the old lady—that's Dorothy—is out of health they tell me, and that's the reason why she is coming to try the benefit of country air. I should have thought some other place might have suited them as well as the Hall. I've a cottage of my own to let, where old Jones, the rat-catcher, lived—I should have thought Dorothy and her son might have been satisfied with that."

Doctor Dixon was evidently a good deal piqued, as well as entertained, at the sudden elevation of the Stauntons ; and, especially so, at their extraordinary presumption in coming to take up their abode even in the worst rooms of a mansion once belonging to an ancient county family of the North Riding of Yorkshire. Nor was this feeling by any means confined to the doctor. Indeed, professionally, and as a matter of policy, he was rather more bound to moderation than others. It was a characteristic of the times, and the places here described, to entertain an ineffable contempt for anything shoppy, and especially when it gave itself airs. The sacredness of the old aristocracy, and the old places and institutions of the county, in the eyes of the farming population, was a matter which might have afforded subject for curious investigation to the antiquarian, as well as to the ethnolo-

gist. For how a race of people so wonderfully independent in themselves, in their habits, and in their general modes of living, so little addicted to yielding, or servility in their own persons, could have cherished this feeling in their hearts, and acted upon it, or, rather, talked about it as they did, could scarcely be accounted for by any of the ordinary rules of science or philosophy. Nor were they at all blind to the faults or follies of the class whom they so venerated, or very sparing of free speech respecting them ; and least of all were they cringing or servile in their own bearing towards them. It was very much like a mere empty system, or hereditary notion, that upon which they loyally drank the healths of the leading men of their aristocracy, and jingled their glasses, and thundered their applause at public dinners. No wonder that it stood for very little when prices of farming produce

fell, and when the tall chimnies grew, and the black smoke curled up from the valleys; and when the farmers' sons were even glad sometimes to fill a place behind the desk of the factory accountant.

It was evident to Alice Gray that the intelligence brought by the doctor of a new occupant of rooms at the Hall had been a matter of lively interest to her father. He was now frequently asking her if she had heard anything further on the subject, and he persisted more earnestly than ever in asserting that he was perfectly recovered, and quite able to resume his accustomed occupations. Alice shared her father's opinion respecting his health, and in due time the doctor was prevailed upon to grant the long-wished-for permission for his patient to return to business.

Had Mr. Gray foreseen what he was to encounter on first being seen abroad, he might have been thankful to prolong the peaceful security of his own quiet chamber. No sooner was it known that Mr. Gray was about again, than the callers, with their anxious faces, came back in greater numbers than before. They came, many of them, with such pertinacity, that Mr. Gray could not keep them out of his private room. Indeed, he was compelled to see them there, for if they would speak, it was not suitable that what they had to say should be exposed to the hearing of any chance occupant of the common sitting-room ; and thus, while Alice heard one and then another asking for her father, and insisting upon seeing him, she could not help trembling for the consequences to his already shaken constitution. And all the while the unaccountableness of the whole

thing filled her with astonishment and perplexity, to think that any sane man should have subjected himself to all this humiliation and annoyance, as it seemed to her, for nothing.

After being so long kept in close attendance upon her father—for if not actually with him, she was about the house, ready to be called at any time—Alice accepted her liberation with as much gladness as the many vexations now pressing upon her permitted her at any time to experience. It was a source of real gladness to her to think that the time of her brother's marriage was drawing near, and that he at least would escape from much that was galling and vexatious in his father's house. He would then, she thought, be at liberty to enter into full possession of that other home, which, although inferior in many respects, possessed

this one merit above all others, that he could legitimately call it his own.

No doubt it was partly from this feeling that Robert now spent so much of his time there, even after the workmen had left, and there could be neither orders to give nor work to superintend. There can be no doubt either, that in a heart like Robert Gray's, there were pleasant thoughts amongst which he found companionship as he traversed those empty-sounding rooms; and there might be visions of the future which transformed his humble habitation into a palace of delights. He was not a man to talk much about such matters, but Alice knew that there was a hidden tenderness in his nature—a shrouded depth of feeling which made him at once estimable to love, and terrible to offend.

“I wish Bessy could understand him bet-

ter," was often her secret wish ; and then she would add, "Perhaps she will when they are married."

With some such feeling as this she wandered up to Whinfield one day, soon after her father had been permitted to leave his room, for she wanted to tell her grandmother and all the family the good tidings of her father being himself again. They had all been strongly advised not to attempt to see the patient, and, more as a matter of precaution than necessity, they had kept away, assured as they were by messages, sent many times every day, that the patient was doing well, and requiring nothing so much as quiet.

Now all anxiety in that quarter seemed to be removed, and everything looked so bright and promising in the world of nature, that Alice, as she walked briskly along, felt that

sense of gladness steal into her heart, which comes more frequently, perhaps, than in any other way from having a recent load removed, and which also comes sometimes from nothing more than the general rejoicing of nature.

Nothing more? Surely this is enough—there are times when it seems almost too much; when the birds first tell us by their glad spring warbling that nature is awake again, that love is young, and life is fresh, and that all things are preparing for the bountiful scattering, and the rich gathering in—the seed-time and the harvest of the world.

Alice Gray was young and healthy, and it was in her nature to be happy—partly because that nature was easily touched and made glad by genial influences around and about her. Just at the present moment she was escaping from long and close confinement, to the pure air and clear sunshine

of one of those days, the most delightful, perhaps, of all our English year, which visit us like angels before our winter has quite gone, to tell us that as surely as Nature holds her wonted course—nay, as surely as God's promises are true, there will be spring, and life and joy again. And some there are who hear these angels in their visitings tell them yet more—that such things cannot die—that even when they shall cease upon this earth, and when the heaven of our vision shall have waxed old as doth a garment, there will still be spring and life and joy in the heaven of heavens for ever and for ever. Is not this what the good angels tell us when they walk beside us over the dewy grass, and whisper in the early foliage of the budding trees, and sing their anthems in the peopled groves, and smile their welcomes in the way-side flowers of spring?

Alice was peculiarly susceptible of all these influences, but we are sorry to say that she had, just at this period of her experience, more to do with worldly cares than with angels' visits ; and although she walked along lightly and gladly on this particular occasion, just escaping from a world of perplexity behind, she was only exchanging one trouble for another, for there were many things at Whinfield which disturbed her peace just now. Indeed, the way which afforded a little respite between the two places seemed too short for her elastic tread on this occasion. She wanted to breathe the air of freedom a little longer. She wanted more time without her burdens, before she took them up again ; and, with this feeling, Alice thought she would prolong her walk by going round by a favourite field, where the path led along the hedge-side, in summer-time under the

shadow of old trees, and then up to Whinfield in a different direction from Applegarth.

The birds were singing over head as Alice walked lightly along, the rooks were wheeling and cawing about over the ploughed field, and all Nature wearing an aspect, as it seemed to her, of joyful anticipation; and as she opened her young heart to these impressions, she thought what a happy girl her cousin ought to be. Alice knew it was in her own nature to be happy under Bessy's circumstances, and she was not ashamed of the fact. Any woman, she thought, might be proud of being made happy by her brother Robert's love; but more proud still that she could make him happy.

While her thoughts were very naturally busying themselves with the affairs of Bessy and her brother, her eye was suddenly

caught by a figure in the distance—nay, two figures, and in an instant Alice knew that one was her cousin and the other Captain Gordon. They appeared to be idly wandering along, like people who have no object beyond that of being together, and Alice's warm indignant blood rushed into her face, for she simply did not like it! As Robert's sister how could she like it, or even regard what she saw with indifference?

There were a thousand reasons why that spectacle should be revolting to Alice's feelings, even without her being able to say that it was absolutely wrong. One was her entire disapproval of Bessy's idleness, while Robert scarcely allowed himself necessary rest. This was no small matter of annoyance to a sister so practically devoted to a brother's interests as Alice was. Another was that she had almost entirely lost faith in Captain Gordon as a man

who had any thought about whether he made mischief or not, so long as his own idle moments were supplied with amusement. Another—but it is of little use specifying causes, the thing itself was hateful and revolting to Alice, to a degree, perhaps, beyond what she herself could have explained.

Her indignant feelings, however, had time to cool down a little, for she herself had escaped observation; and believing this to be so, Alice hastened on to Whinfield, there to await the return of her cousin, and to speak to her, as she fully intended doing, when she herself should be more calm. Before Bessy's return there, Alice had time to see her grandmother and aunt, and to tell the good tidings of her father's recovery, with such other scraps of news as she was able to recollect for their benefit. And when this had been gone through, thinking her cousin could not

be much longer absent, she rose to take leave, saying,

“I will now go and meet Bessy, for I fancy she will be coming home by Poplar Lane.”

This allusion to Bessy was as the stirring of troubled waters to old Margaret Gray, who was apt to speak her mind pretty freely on most occasions, and to most persons ; and who now broke out in no measured terms, complaining of that “lazy good-for-nothing lass,” as she called her, who never did anything but break in pointer dogs, and let other people slave their lives out for her.

Whatever the amount of Alice’s own wrath might be, it was always softened by hearing the subject of it abused by others, and she now ventured to say for Bessy that all which her grandmother disapproved would soon be over, and that her cousin would be very different after she was once married.

“She’d need be different,” said the old lady, “but for my part I don’t know what’s to come of it.”

And here followed various expressions of contempt for “Bessy’s goings on,” which were scarcely intelligible beyond broken syllables and half articulate sounds, all full of the same meaning; amongst which, however, Alice could distinctly gather something like—“gallivanting with that soldier fellow, that nobody knows, nor wants to know !”

It was evident that the tide of vexation was running very high in Whinfield just now, for grandmother’s disapprobation, or the contrary—her love or her hate, generally gave the tone to the great body of feeling in that house. Afraid, therefore, lest any betrayal of her own opinion should make the mischief worse, Alice, somewhat decidedly, effected her

escape ; and, on leaving the house, she turned into the path which led in the direction from whence she thought her cousin would come.

Scarcely had Alice closed the garden-gate behind her, when she saw her cousin in the distance, now alone, except that she appeared closely occupied with a large black dog, whose gambols she was endeavouring to restrain. Whether Bessy perceived that Alice was in the path before they actually met, was not very easy to discover, so entirely was her attention fixed upon the dog. When they did meet at last, however, she acted a little surprise—Alice thought it was acting ; and she thought, too, that her cousin's face was flushed with some inward consciousness, that if she did not catch a reproof, she deserved one ; and perhaps she felt, too, that Alice, as Robert's sister, had a right to administer that reproof.

This, and more, might be in Bessy's mind—who could tell? For she was still intent upon the dog, hauling it up by a string, and insisting upon it doing what it was neither in her power, nor that of any other person, to make it do.

“I wish you would just let that dog alone for a minute,” said Alice. “I want to talk to you. Come down the hill with me, will you, Bessy?”

“Let me tie him up, then,” said Bessy; “for if I let him loose, he'll be sure to run away.”

“Whose dog is he?” asked Alice.

“Mine,” replied Bessy, looking up with a flash of defiance into her cousin's face. “Captain Gordon gave him to me. Isn't he a beauty?”

“Make haste and tie him up,” said Alice; “and come with me, for it is high time I was at home.”

Bessy could find no excuse for refusing. She went and secured the dog, and came back again with that peculiar look which naughty children wear when called up for chastisement—a look which seems to say, “Now I’m in for it.”

But there was no nonsense, no by-play on her cousin’s part. She spoke directly to the point, and she spoke strongly, because she was speaking for her brother, and for all that he held dearest and most sacred in life.

Bessy, who was in no mood for being lectured, put on at first a sullen and resentful manner. She even went so far as to assert that she was mistress of her own actions. But by degrees her haughty manner subsided, and before Alice had done speaking, she became both serious and quiet, and at length betrayed signs of sorrow; for Alice knew by her drooping head and faltering

voice that she was struggling with feelings to which pride alone prevented her from yielding. It needed only this evidence of feeling for Alice to become at once both pitiful and affectionate, and in gentle tones she then pleaded with her cousin, that for very kindness sake she would spare Robert, and not wantonly inflict upon him wounds which she might never have the skill to cure.

“Robert is very stern sometimes,” said Bessy, thoughtfully. “Do you know, Alice, he says that if I vex him again as I have done, he will break with me for ever?”

“And he will do so, Bessy. I have no manner of doubt.”

“I doubt it, though. However, I don’t mean to try.”

“No, Bessy, you had better not. He is not a man to be played with. You had better throw away your life, than throw away the

love of such a man as Robert. At least, I know I would."

"Perhaps I would too. But you see—nay, I cannot tell you all. There are things you cannot understand. I wish you could."

"Perhaps I can."

"No, Alice, you can't; because, to speak plain, you don't know Captain Gordon."

"I should have thought that I, of all people, might know him. I had the care of him all through his illness."

"Yes; but to know a man ill, and insensible, and tied up with bandages, and taking physic, is very different from knowing him in health, and strength, and beauty, and——"

"I don't know what you mean, Bessy; but if you mean anything, it is something that frightens me to think of. What have you to do with Captain Gordon's beauty?"

"Only, that I like to look at it. And then

he talks to me so. I know it means nothing, and he knows that I do. I am perfectly on my guard, and true to Robert—indeed I am, and will be, but——”

“But you listen to another man’s flatteries, and you like to hear them.”

“Perhaps I do, a little too much. And so perhaps would you in my place; for you have no idea, Alice, you can have no idea, how pleasant Captain Gordon can make himself, compared with the farming sort of men that we are accustomed to.”

“You are playing a dangerous game, Bessy—it won’t do.”

“I knew you would scold me, Alice, and perhaps you have a right to do so. But I still plead in my own defence, that you don’t know how delicate, and kind, and thoughtful Captain Gordon can be, when he is in a grave and pleasant mood, and tells me how he

stands alone in the world, and has nobody to care for him, and a thousand things which you cannot form a notion of."

"I can form a notion of one thing, Bessy."

"What is that?"

"That this game at which Captain Gordon is playing with you, will be just played over again with the next handsome girl who may fall in his way; that to him it is only play, but that to you it is danger—I had almost said death. What would you do, Bessy, if Robert should, as he threatened, break with you for ever?"

"I don't know—go to the bottom of the sea, I think. But he won't—he won't do that!"

"He will, if he says it, as sure as we two stand here."

"But what am I to do?"

“Do? Why, let that man go to the winds, or wherever he likes to go. Never risk the happiness of a man like Robert, and your own happiness too, for the sake of a few idle hours with him.”

“You speak so seriously, Alice. We are only amusing ourselves. You know I like to amuse myself—and so does Captain Gordon.”

“And while you two are amusing yourselves with the veriest folly that ever made one blush for shame, there is that great, true, noble heart of my brother’s ready to break for you. Oh, Bessy, be a woman—be an honourable, faithful, true-hearted woman, or you never *shall* be my brother’s wife. I tell you again, he is not a man to be trifled with. His power to carry out a purpose is almost terrible, it is so strong. And then he is so tender in his love—so unselfish, so considerate,

so true-hearted, a man whose affection ought to be the pride and glory of the woman of his choice. Think of him, too, in the miserable life he is leading—working like a slave for you—Bessy, I cannot bear to think of it! You and I should be more than sisters, seeing we have been friends so long. Let me entreat you, by all the ties that bind us together—by our girlish love and intimacy—let me entreat you to come out of this mean and foolish entanglement, and be your better self—be a woman worthy of my noble brother's love!"

Bessy remained silent for a moment, as if in deep thought. Then turning suddenly towards her cousin, she laid her hand upon her arm, and looking steadily in her face, said—
"So help me God, I will!"

"Then bless you!—God bless you for ever

more!" exclaimed Alice; and then the two cousins embraced, and kissed, and shed a few tears together, and parted.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE of the most redeeming points in Bessy's character was that, when brought to confession, she either was, or appeared to be, thoroughly repentant. It is true she had gone over the same ground many times in her life with almost all those friends who loved her best, and who still forgave her, or, at least, had forgiven her up to this time. But Bessy was not the first person, or, probably, will be the last, who, in making confession, can so humour the material as to lay it on very thickly in some places, and spread it very thin in others. On such occasions Bessy could say dreadful things about herself—depreciate, blacken, and abuse herself, and so

awaken a strong desire in those who heard her, and felt kindly towards her, to dispute the justness of so much cruel blame, and to plead in extenuation of her faults. And yet, all the while, it might not unreasonably be suspected that Bessy was not telling quite the truth, on some particular pet points, which she still kept in reserve, unsearched into by any strictly judging eye, unswept by any unsparing besom of reform.

We are not always ready to be set right on every point just when our friends would do this kind service for us ; and if there is anything in which we are wrong, and intend still to be wrong, it is certainly bad policy to bring the matter to the test of argument, because our friends will always be more ready to forgive us for simply doing wrong, than for endeavouring to prove that wrong is right ; and still less will they forgive us for not being

guided by their advice, nor moved by their persuasions.

All this belongs to those entanglements which constitute the bane of woman's existence—those entanglements in which they who walk without resolutely determining to extricate themselves, are sure to lose their firm footing upon the everlasting foundation of simple and unchangeable right ; to lose also their own clear perception of what is right, of where the wrong begins, so that they grope on in endless confusion, perhaps never quite so bad as some people think them, yet never quite so good as to know the blessedness of security and peace.

Having made some approach towards confessing that she was wrong, and beginning also to feel a little alarmed lest mischief should come of it, Bessy showed no desire to avoid her cousin's society ; but rather sought it

again, as if she felt a certain strength and support against temptation in talking with Alice. Perhaps, too, she was rather dull, and found the time hang heavily on her hands, for she had gone so far as to refuse either to ride or walk with Captain Gordon; and without some such pleasant recreation, there could be very little intercourse kept up of a nature calculated either to amuse the gallant soldier, or to endanger Bessy's safety.

"I am all right now, and *so* good," said Bessy, on meeting with her cousin soon after the interview already described. "No one can find fault with me now. I have positively refused either to ride or walk with Captain Gordon; and, Alice, there is one thing I want to tell you—he is going to leave the place—going quite away, and for ever."

"I am glad of it," said Alice. "But when is he going?"

“ In a few days—perhaps in a week or so.”

“ Then just be a wise, brave girl, Bessy, as I know you can be, and keep out of all folly and all danger until he is quite gone.”

“ I shall. You may depend upon that. Only, Alice, you must forgive me, but I do pity him so !”

“ Pity him ! What for ?”

“ Why, you see, he has no friends scarcely—he stands so alone in the world ; and——”

“ Nonsense ! He has as many friends as other men have. Perhaps not so many relatives as some. But what is that to you ?”

“ Don’t be so severe and so stern, Alice. You might pity him a little. I am sure you would if you could know how he goes on.”

“ Perhaps I have heard how he goes on.”

“ No, not as I hear him. You can never have done that, because—do you know ?—now, don’t tell Robert—I did not listen more

than I could help ; and I should not have listened at all if I had not been engaged—almost married, you see, and he knowing that I am.”

“ Well, what does he say ? It can’t be a secret what he says to a woman who is engaged and almost married.”

“ No ; I don’t see how it can be a secret. He says he never met with any woman to whom he could pour out his feelings as he can to me.”

“ Indeed !”

“ No woman whom he shall find it so impossible to forget.”

“ Indeed !”

“ No woman who could make him feel the value of life so much.”

“ Indeed !”

“ Now, Alice, you are making game. I see

by your looks you are. I won't tell you any more."

"I hope there is no more to tell."

"No. There is nothing more, nor worse than that."

"And quite bad enough, Bessy."

"But you need not make game."

"Nay, Bessy, it is no game to me. But yet, I must confess, it strikes me as not at all unlikely that Captain Gordon will say the very same to the next girl who may happen to please his fancy."

"No, Alice ; you are mistaken there. You don't know Captain Gordon. I have told you so before. It is not likely that you should know him as I do."

"Well, Bessy, I won't dispute that point with you ; but I must say that I think all this is very dangerous and very bad."

"It is all over and done with now, I tell

you ; and I shall really be glad when Captain Gordon is gone, for I cannot bear to see him look so sad, and to think how desolate and lonely he is !”

“ Bessy, I shall lose all patience with you if you talk in that way. Bound as you are to one man, and such a man, what right have you to be talking and feeling in this way about another ?”

“ Let us talk about something else, then, Alice ; and there is one other subject on which I really do want a little of your common sense, and a little of your good advice. I feel that I have been very wrong, and how sorry I am I cannot tell you. I have been wrong in taking my brother Willy to see that old Major, and to listen to his profane talk. I think I did it in a sort of bravado. In the same spirit I took up cudgels for Major Inglewood himself, and now I hate him. I cannot

tell you how disgusted I am with him, Alice. I am disgusted with what he seems to mean, rather than with what he says ; and I very seldom go near him now. But the mischief is done with poor Willy. Do you know, Alice, I don't think he believes either in God or devil now !”

“ Can't you persuade him to keep away ?”

“ If I do, he borrows books, and reads them deep into the night. My honest belief is, that he is going crazy. He has fallen in love with that little peeping mouse that sits in a corner by the fire, and I can't keep him away, whatever I say or do.”

“ Don't speak of Kate Inglewood in that absurd way. She does not deserve that you should. I know her better than you do, and I feel sure she will do her best to keep your brother out of harm.”

“ But Willy was so good once—I do

think pure as an angel. I cannot bear to think of what I have done !”

“ Well, I don’t reproach you, Bessy, with having done this mischief with your eyes open—that belongs to the past. Do let us think of the future now. Only keep all things right with Robert—that is the great concern upon my mind just now ; and by *all things* I mean yourself—only keep yourself right, and then all will be well.”

“ I cannot imagine how people do keep right in this world. How do you manage it, Alice ?”

“ I don’t manage it at all, I am afraid, in the gravest sense of that expression, for who is right in the sight of God ?”

“ I don’t mean that, exactly. What I want to know is, how you manage to keep out of scrapes—how do you manage to avoid doing things that are thought wrong, and condemned by other people ?”

“I daresay I don’t manage that either. No doubt I am often thought wrong, and I know too well that I often am wrong. But there is one great difference between you and me, and if I point it out, be sure I am not attaching any particular merit to my own conduct. Remember I had no mother to watch over me, as you had. I was obliged to take care of myself. Perhaps, too, I was naturally a greater coward than you. However that might be, I believe that very early in life I acquired this habit—when I clearly saw a thing to be wrong, and did not want to do it because it was wrong, I went a long way round to get out of the way of it, I would not even look at it. Above all, I would not play with it, lest I should get entangled and drawn in unawares.”

“And I suppose I do just the contrary. If I see a thing is wrong, and at the same time

rather attractive, I go out of my way to look at it ; I look very near—perhaps touch it—play with it. Is that what I do, Alice?”

“Yes ; and then ten to one but you have to fight, as it were, for life to get away. And when you do get away, the entanglements remain about you, and you yourself are so tossed and torn by the conflict, that you don’t look the same clear, bright, upright woman in the eyes of other people, as you would have done if you had kept quite away from the evil which had still power to hurt you, even while you were escaping from it.”

“You have drawn an ugly picture, Alice ; I don’t like to look at it.”

“I will draw another, and oh ! my darling Bessy—my more than sister, if I could but think my thoughts into your heart without speaking them, and show you in all love and kindness where your danger lies—if I could

but induce you to think more of Robert—to set more real store by such a love as his—if I could only make you understand what you would lose in losing him !”

“ I understand all that, Alice. Draw me your other picture.”

“ You have seen the playful swallows, Bessy, on a summer’s day, when we have been walking in the meadows with our dogs, how they have pursued and darted down upon them sometimes, so near as actually to touch them.”

“ Yes ; but I never saw them caught, nor you either, I believe.”

“ Then you have seen, on a hot June evening, when sitting with the windows open, a moth come fluttering nearer and nearer the candle, until at last its wings were singed, and it fell never to rise again.”

“ Ah ! but I have not fallen, Alice, and I don’t mean to fall.”

“I don’t suppose you do. Nor do I fear that you ever will fall. The moth I speak of may have many warnings—a little hurt at first—its wing just singed—its down just ruffled, and yet it flies to the candle again. With all its warnings, it will not keep away.”

“Do you mean, then, that I am warned, Alice?”

“I do. You were warned when Robert himself undertook to warn you. You were warned the other day by me. You are warned always by your own heart, without my interference; only that I love you, Bessy, more than ever now, that you are to be Robert’s wife—I love you doubly, for his sake and your own; and I want him to feel that his wife is a true-hearted woman, as brave to do right, as she could be bold to do wrong.”

“Robert was very terrible that time you speak of. I shall never forget it.”

“I don’t wish you to forget it. It would be worse for you if you should.”

“I think still it was passion. I don’t believe he would carry out what he threatened.”

“You may depend upon it he would. Yes, if it cost him his life!”

Alice was always strong upon this point. She knew her brother’s character, and could understand what he would do, even where he had never yet been tried. She had also, like him, those strict notions of fidelity and truth, especially of fidelity in relation to such connection as existed between her brother and cousin, of the pure and elevated nature of which the latter appeared to have formed no very distinct idea. To avoid vexing her husband, or making him very unhappy, to pet him when ill-tempered, and laugh with him when pleased, was perhaps as far as Bessy’s

thoughts were accustomed to reach in her code of wifely morality ; and it is wonderful how well satisfied men in general are with this, and nothing more ; so that Bessy was not so much to be blamed after all, for she was earnest and sincere in her determination to be all this to her husband.

Looking at the matter from her point of view, it was not very easy for her to talk freely and intimately with Alice on this subject. That she was right and true in her heart towards Robert, she always asserted ; and perhaps she was, for no man could have tempted her beyond a certain line of fidelity ; and perhaps no man had ever talked with Bessy, however idly, without feeling that she was a good girl, in a certain sense—a modest girl, too, towards whom, however playful their intercourse might be, he must still observe a considerable amount of delicacy and re-

serve, or incur her prompt and outspoken displeasure, with little chance of ever being admitted to the same familiar terms again.

In whatever way Bessy might transgress the ordinary rules of conventional propriety, it was simply as a wild, high-spirited, country girl, never as a schemer—scarcely a coquette. All men who knew her knew this; and even Captain Gordon felt a strong conviction that he had only to advance a shade too far, to be dismissed from her companionship at once and for ever.

In a certain sense, Captain Gordon was too much a gentleman to have made such an experiment, and hence Bessy's feeling of safety, and even of propriety, to some extent, in her intercourse with him. Besides which, it was to him the merest child's play, the amusement of a vacant hour, to laugh and talk with Bessy. Thus he went on, until even

this amusement began to pall a little upon his taste; and then, to render it more piquant, he tried to deepen what he considered a very agreeable impression, by playing his little trick of sentiment, talking about his loneliness, his want of somebody to care for him, and so on, advancing upon the tack of pity, and then back again upon that other tack of female vanity, making it clear that the woman he addressed was the only one in the whole world who had power over his nature and his destiny; and so on, and on, every woman knows how, who has lived beyond the age of childhood, with a face not altogether ugly.

Bessy had hitherto been pretty well acquainted with the outspoken flatteries of men of that rural neighbourhood—of men who hunted, and attended markets, and who laboured with their own hands sometimes in

hay-field and harvest-field. For such flattery she had always had a ready retort, showing plainly that it passed by her only like a pleasant breeze, without leaving much more impression after it was gone.

But to the flattery of sentiment she had hitherto been almost a total stranger—to the touching statements of men who were “alone”—“uncared for”—“thrown upon a desert world without a smile of welcome, or a tear if they should die and leave it;” nor had Bessy ever had her attention called to herself before in language which pointed her out as the only being capable of doing an inestimable service, merely by a kind thought, a tender look, or a sympathetic expression.

All this sounded new, and wonderfully fine to Bessy’s ear, and from such a handsome man, too, a man from whom she must inevitably part soon, and for ever. The very cir-

cumstances of the case filled her with a tender and touching interest; for what would he do? What *could* he do, if she was the only woman towards whom he had ever felt, or could feel all this, and she was just on the eve of being married to another! It was to Bessy a very affecting case indeed, more so than any which had ever been brought so near her before. She dared not, however, say quite so much as she felt about it to her cousin, because Alice would not understand it. How could she?

Therefore it was that the interview, already described, was closed without Bessy having told the whole truth. She was afraid—absolutely afraid to tell her cousin that Captain Gordon had requested her to grant him just one parting interview. Nay, he had playfully insisted upon it, and declared that he would not leave the neighbourhood without it. So that, as Bessy walked up the field from

Applegarth, indeed almost wherever she walked now, her glance was cast inquiringly into the distance, or on either side, while she sometimes startled with a sudden alarm, fancying that she saw a dark figure emerging in the twilight from behind a tree.

If Bessy in her heart of hearts had really wished to avoid this interview, nothing could have been easier. In that case she might have made Captain Gordon know, beyond a doubt, that to herself personally it would not be agreeable. Instead of which, she only succeeded in convincing him that it would be objectionable to him who was about to become her husband. And thus, as usual, Bessy was approaching the evil which still she had a secret fear of—looking at it—touching it—playing with it, like the moth, at the risk of singeing her wings.

Captain Gordon did not make his appear-

ance that day, and Bessy was at liberty to go home and think. Alice was left behind, engaged in the same way; she was thinking—thinking, what an amount of feeling she had thrown away upon a man who could tell the same story, perhaps, to every woman with whom he might have the chance to tell it. And yet there were grounds of evidence, and Alice knew there were, for believing that he had once in his life, for a short time, been sincere.

A man can scarcely act the hypocrite on first coming back to life, after standing, as it were, on the edge of the grave; and even now that he had so soon forgotten, or rather so entirely changed his views, she knew that her patient had not been without a real meaning in what he had said to her—that he had spoken the true sentiments of his heart for the time being, although she was well aware

that circumstances, perhaps more than choice, had called those sentiments into existence.

All this was nothing to her now, for if, in ever so slight a degree, it pleased her womanly vanity to feel that the words which touched her so deeply at the time had been words of genuine and heartfelt truth, every other consideration was now merged in a kind of triumphant joy at the result—that not only had she had a wonderful escape, but that her own self-possession had never failed her—in short, that her girlish feelings, for the first time called forth in all their disinterested kindness and devotion, had never betrayed her into the commission, so far as she knew, of a single act from which it could reasonably have been argued that she was a weak and foolish woman.

When the miser counts his hoarded wealth, whatever the amount may be, he can never

know such entire satisfaction as the woman who, under the most trying, because the most tender circumstances, can say, in looking back, "I did not make a fool of myself—no man can say that I did."

Bessy was not quite so happy as Alice in her meditations, especially as she had on this occasion her brother William's case brought forcibly before her. While seated alone in her own chamber, a quiet step approached her door, and then a tap as gentle, and then her mother entered, with tearful eyes, to speak with her, she said, on a difficult and painful matter. And then ensued a long, and unusually confidential discussion between the mother and daughter, concerning one who was dear to both, though in a different manner and degree.

Here, then, was that which had already become a sore point with Bessy, touched

again—not harshly, but very tenderly, and that made Bessy feel it the more. Indeed, she began to think her sins were all finding her out, and this thought might have added one warning the more to the many she had already received, if she would but have listened to it.

Mrs. Bell was a woman but little addicted to making accusations against others, whatever might be the amount of mischief of which they had been the cause. The act of judgment constituted no part of her religion. Her office, so far as she knew how to fulfil it, was to save—to comfort—to maintain peace at home. Good, meek-hearted woman, that she was, she had never learned this lesson in the school of wisdom—that to keep peace there must be discipline. Her soft, motherly hand was ever stretched out to smooth down the roughnesses of life ; but as to preventing

them, that was a deep question in social philosophy, of which she was profoundly ignorant.

The trouble on Mrs. Bell's mind, in relation to her son William, had been increasing for some time. In connection with her own religious views, embracing, as they did, the fervid devotion of the Wesleyan body, this son of her love had, amongst all her household, been the only true participator, and in him she had hoped to find not only entire sympathy, but even support. There were others amongst them—her husband, but especially her mother—who held by a sort of hereditary tenure to the same religious profession, and who attended the same chapel. But William, her pure-minded, devout, and sensitive boy, had early been a true worshipper with her—not merely a professor, but a sincere and ardent devotee ;

and it had secretly been the joy and pride of her heart to think that he would one day consecrate his fine talents to the ministry. With this view she had not regretted, as her husband did, that he had but little turn for business. His calling, she fondly thought, was of a higher, holier nature. She said little, on the occurrence of her husband's frequent complaints, on this ground, but with true motherly feeling, she hid the matter in her heart.

Now, how changed was everything in relation to this child of her affections—how spoilt was her garden of beauty, its fruits and flowers all wasted by the wild boar of the wilderness. The great resource of natures like that of this gentle mother is prayer. Without prayer how could they exist? How could they bear the burden of life? Many an hour had Mrs. Bell spent in this way when all

the rest of the household were sleeping—praying and pleading on behalf of her child. And after long nights, in which the mother's very knees were weary, the daughter had gone off with her brother, laughing and defiant, to plunge him again into the troubled waters of temptation, heedless of what might be the result.

How strange is life!—and life so closely shared, that sometimes it seems as if we had but to lift a curtain, and behold she prays—a mother, a sister, any one who loves, prays, and weeps, and wrestles for the dear one, nay, agonises; for love is strong as death, and with a tenacity like that of the death-grasp, holds on to the last. We drop the curtain. The tears are too real, the anguish too sharp, the struggle too close and desperate for any mere looker-on to witness. So we drop the curtain, and on the other side there is laughter and

merriment, and the toss of a farthing whether that soul, so wrestled for, is lost or saved.

On the day when Mrs. Bell adopted the unwonted expedient of consulting with her daughter Bessy, a step which she would scarcely have taken had not all others appeared just then to be failing—on that day William had gone by invitation to dine at Major Inglewood's.

Since Bessy had been disgusted, as she expressed it, with the old gentleman, she had herself been a much less frequent visitor, and certainly her young brother could not be supposed a very congenial companion to a man of the world like the Major. Thus the intercourse had a good deal fallen off, although books from the Major's library were still freely lent, and the influence of his peculiar opinions appeared to be as strong as ever.

To Major Inglewood it was a very different thing amusing himself with a charming girl like Bessy, and enduring without her the sentimental twaddle of a sickly, puling lad, as he was apt to call her brother; so that when the former ceased to accept his gallantries, he was willing enough to let the other go. But the mischief was done, as regarded William, for whom the Major's house had attractions which he himself had perhaps never calculated upon. The least opening, the vaguest invitation was consequently sufficient to attract William within the enchanted precincts, and he sometimes found himself there without any invitation at all.

With all Major Inglewood's urbanity when he chose to be civil, there was mingled an amount of spite which was ready at any moment to burst forth into active operation. He was first piqued at Bessy's withdrawing her-

self from the spell of his attractions, and then bored with the society of the brother. If he must lose the one he wished for, he was not going to have the other imposed upon him. So, as a last resource, and as a trick in perfect accordance with his humour, he one day invited William to dine, taking care that there should be two or three convivial guests at the table, with whose habits he was well acquainted.

It had never formed any important part of William's enjoyment to eat and drink at the Major's table, but he was especially flattered in the present instance by the invitation to meet the Major's friends. And then he knew there would be the after dinner in the drawing-room with Kate. So that altogether the temptation proved too much for him, and the day we have been speaking of was the day on which he went.

What took place on this occasion was never very clearly understood by any of the family at Whinfield. Mrs. Bell sat up for her son until near midnight, and then received him from the supporting arms of Major Inglewood's servant, in a condition which stained her usually pale cheek with crimson shame. Most likely the Major considered it an excellent joke, and laughed heartily with his friends at the idea of sending home the Methodist lad in that condition to his mother. But there was one even beneath the Major's roof who did not laugh, who found no amusement in the degradation of any human being, and who considered it a shameful breach of hospitality to take so unfair an advantage of an inexperienced youth.

Poor Kate Inglewood had grieved enough over what was going on, but she was powerless to prevent it. Her father was de-

terminated to play out his comedy, and the more so that he hoped the youth would by this means be deterred from troubling him again. Thus, while the laughter and merriment in the dining-room rose high, Kate busied herself with the means of rescue. All her little expedients, however, entirely failed, and she had not the courage, nor, indeed, the power, to insist upon stronger measures. All that she could do was to bribe her father's servant to convey the young man safely home, after the amusement caused by his strange condition had died out. Nor did it add much to her distress that he had thus committed himself. She had so long watched the danger coming, and, indeed, worse dangers than a fit of intemperance, bad as that might be, that, like her father, though in a very different spirit, she hoped this

catastrophe would put an end to the intercourse which she had deeply deplored.

So frequent, at the time of which we write, were such catastrophes, that scarcely did an ordinary dinner-party conclude without something of the kind. Even Mr. Bell, though vexed at heart, could scarcely be persuaded by his wife to treat the matter seriously. Nay, he even went so far as to say it would make a man of Willy, if he would only take care, because it would teach him for the future how far he could safely go.

But in the mother's anxious mind the whole matter wore a different and a much more serious aspect. To her it was a matter very much resembling one of life and death, and as such it weighed upon her all through that long sleepless night; and as she lay

watching for the dawn of day, that she might go up into her son's chamber, to see how he fared, and to try if there were anything she could say or do to help him to a better understanding of his perilous condition, sinning, as she believed he had been, against his conscience ; for she knew little of those other changes which had taken place in his mind, and which led him to doubt, or to persuade himself that he doubted, whether there really was such a thing as sin at all.

Mrs. Bell found her son, as might have been expected, with a headache bordering on distraction. She found him sick in body, and disgusted in mind ; although he had no clear recollection of anything that had transpired. In every way he was wretched, yet so stunned and stupefied, that he was incapable of any distinct sorrow or compunc-

tion. That was all to come afterwards. And it did come, with such force that, added to many other new and strange influences operating upon his mind, and amongst all the overwhelming sensation that he had now nothing to hold by—that he was drifting away, away, a wild ocean surging all around him—no star, no hope!—all this, in addition to the restlessness of his days of late, and the sleeplessness of his nights, with the general disturbance of his whole system, threw the poor youth into a fever, attended with delirium, caused, as the doctor said, by unusual pressure on the brain.

Some people were malicious enough to say, when they heard of poor William's condition, and where he had been on the night before his illness, that the old Major had drugged his wine; but they were persons who knew very little of the usages of polished life, and who,

besides this, held Major Inglewood in such low esteem, that they could scarcely say anything about him that was bad enough.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOTHING could be more natural than that a man like Captain Gordon should soon grow tired of life spent in a large, dreary house, situated in a quiet rural district like Pickering Vale. True, there were many charming residences within reach, many old ancestral homes of the aristocracy, and many hospitable gatherings in them, especially about Christmas time. But neither Sir James Huntley, as a partner in a manufacturing firm, nor my lady's nephew, Captain Gordon, was likely to be invited to participate in such enjoyments. Indeed, it had been altogether a mistake, that costly purchase which Sir James had made of an estate in the North Riding.

He might live there if he liked, and keep what state he would, but neither from the ranks above him, nor from those below, was it possible for him to command the respectful consideration which he, and especially his lady, felt they had a right to expect.

Thus the Hall was an extremely dull residence, notwithstanding its agreeable surroundings, and the sums of money which had been spent on its embellishment. The country was at first pleasant enough to Captain Gordon, because he had now the means of exhibiting himself as the owner of two of the best horses in the neighbourhood, and especially of one which he rode proudly, because he knew it to be the mark of many an envious eye.

But, as already said, a man cannot always hunt, nor shoot either. There are stormy days, and long frosts, and many necessary hindrances to the pursuit of these invigorating

recreations. What to do in such cases of suspended animation had been a question of no small moment with Captain Gordon. What he did, or attempted to do, in the way of supplying himself with amusement in one direction, we have already seen, and had Bessy been willing to ride with him, either in the hunting-field, or in the green lanes, when there was no hunting, he might have found his position more endurable.

Not only, however, was the riding put a stop to, but even the walking was now forbidden, so that the gallant Captain was entirely thrown upon his own resources, and they were not fertile in producing what he was most in need of. It was ridiculously annoying, the Captain said to himself, that he could not enjoy a little chat with a handsome girl, when he meant no harm. "Poor Bessy!" How he did pity that girl! What a fate

she was about to consign herself to ! How he hated that iron-hearted, duty-doing fellow, for ever digging, and plodding, planting potatoes, and foddering cows. It was a crying shame for Bessy, with all her blooming charms, to be given over to such a destiny as that of living continually under the guardianship and rule of such a man—roasting his beef, and baking his puddings, through the whole course of her mortal life. Poor Bessy ! Yes, poor Bessy ! All the Captain's cogitations on this subject wound up with the same conclusion—"Poor Bessy !"

The pity felt by one man for the affianced bride of another is seldom a very safe or profitable investment of feeling. Something of the nature of this pity was continually infusing itself into the intercourse which Captain Gordon had managed, up to this time, to maintain with Bessy. He did not say in so many

words that he pitied her, but he showed her pretty plainly that he considered her fitted for a more genial, and, consequently, a happier lot. There was something also in Bessy's own position at this time—something, as her future lay before her, which looked a little too much like bondage for her taste. Hitherto her soul had exulted in freedom and independence. She had gloried in her own whims and caprices, and, in her right to indulge them to their full extent, no man making her afraid. But already the bondage had begun. She must not ride a beautiful horse when freely offered for her use ; no, though she had lost her own, and this was needing exercise, she must not mount it, and go, as it would carry her, fleet as the wind, over hill and dale, until she felt her cheek glow, and the blood run warm in her veins—felt, in short, as those do who love this exercise, as if she could ride

down care and sorrow, and as if nothing in the world could ever hurt her more. No. She must give up all this. She must never taste again this exhilarating sensation—this exulting and ineffable joy.

Nor was this enough. The bondage was growing closer. She must not walk, nor talk, with one who told her more pleasant things about herself in one half-hour, than the man she was about to marry told her in a whole year. And if she was really so much to this handsome stranger, was it kind, was it right, was it absolutely necessary, that she should withdraw herself entirely from his society, seeing that he knew exactly how she was circumstanced, and that neither of them had a thought of harm?

Bessy was carelessly tossing these questions to and fro in her mind one day, as she walked in the fields, until there arose, quite unex-

pected to herself, a slight disposition to rebel. She had been rather annoyed of late at the absence of those little attentions from Robert which she naturally thought her position demanded. Perhaps he had been a little careless about them, but then he was so busy—so pressed with a vast amount of work, to be done by a certain time, with few hands to do it, and those which he could command neither skilful nor expeditious. Determined, in her turn, to assume the dignity of reproof, Bessy had wandered off that morning to see what Robert could be doing to engage his attention so closely at Homefield. To her astonishment he was not there! All that the men at work knew about him was, that he had gone off on his mare at six o'clock that morning, and, as he left them orders for the day, they did not look for him home again before night.

“He might have let me know!” said Bessy

to herself in a kind of huff; and then she called her dog, and went rambling away for a long bracing walk, such as she knew, by often-tried experience, would cure her ill-humours, and make all the world look pleasant and bright to her again.

Bessy determined, in her own mind, that her walk should be a very long one that day, and briskly she stepped along over the short turf, through the grass fields, and away over a wide space of furzy common, sprinkled with cottages, until she reached the distance of three or more miles from Whinfield. Here she stopped a moment, to consider whether to make a wide circuit homeward, or to retrace her steps by the way she had come. She had just decided on the former plan of course, for who likes to retrace their steps, when the sound of a horse at full speed arrested her attention.

Looking round, Bessy knew both horse and rider in a moment. It was Captain Gordon, mounted on Red Rose, practising her paces on the common, where there were certain little streams, and bushes of furze, which made capital leaping-places ; while the close turf of the more open common was equally good for a gallop.

It was only natural that both rider and walker should look very glad to meet so unexpectedly in such a far-off place, nor did they appear at all solicitous to conceal from each other that they were glad—the less so, perhaps, on Bessy's part that her conscience was quite clear ; for she had, as she declared, no more idea of meeting Captain Gordon there, than of meeting Buonaparte himself—then the great bugbear and starting-point of all wonders to women and children, and sometimes to men.

Well, and what was to be done now ? The case did not admit of the shadow of a doubt. Captain Gordon dismounted, and leading his horse, walked along beside Bessy—the more closely, that he said he had been for the last week dying to see her, and had something very important to tell her.

Bessy listened, of course. There could not have been a better opportunity for the Captain to tell her anything he might wish to tell, nor a better opportunity for her to listen to him, because her *conscience was so very clear*.

So the two walked on, making a very wide circuit through lanes and hamlets so little frequented by the Applegarth and Whinfield people that Bessy scarcely knew her way, and as the whole day was before her, did not, perhaps, care much to find it—*her conscience being so very clear*.

So the two walked on, talking very earnest-

ly, and after awhile very gravely, for the important fact which Captain Gordon wanted to communicate was that he was going away,—soon, and for ever. The importance of this fact, if estimated by the effect it was likely to produce in the neighbourhood where he had been living, would not have been great, but to judge by the countenance of the two talkers it was weighty and important indeed. Even Bessy was serious, and when her companion stated that, in addition to other reasons for his taking this step there was one to him supreme above all others—that he did not wish to see—in fact, *could* not witness the event of her marriage, it is very sad to be obliged to tell of Bessy that she just then raised her eyes to his, and that those eyes, always beautiful, were at that moment suffused with tears.

Yet so it was. The cause of those tears

did not lie very deep. Bessy had been put out of humour early in the morning, and she was one of those women whose little vexations are apt to end in tears ; but then she need not have raised her glistening eyes to Captain Gordon's just at that touching moment. In that little act she could scarcely feel that her conscience *was* quite clear.

Very pleasant, because very flattering were those tears for Bessy's companion to contemplate. He thought their source deeper than it really was. He did not know that they would very likely have started just as readily at the ringing of distant village bells, the song of a blackbird in an apple-tree, or a kind word from an old shepherd seated at his cottage door. After the humour Bessy had been in that morning, ending as such humours often did with her, the merest circumstance in nature might have called up tears in her bright eyes.

And then they were eyes of that rare kind which are improved, not spoiled, by tears ; eyes that weep for little, or nothing, generally are. Tears come to such eyes like dew to flowers—they only glimmer the more brightly for such moisture, when the sadness of a passing moment gives place to joy.

Still, light as the cause was, Bessy should not have looked up while those tears were in her eyes. But she did. And she allowed the Captain to say many things that day which he ought not to have said, simply because it was the last time he would ever have the chance of saying them ; and nobody but herself and her companion would ever know what he did say. The fault, if it were one, would never be repeated. This was their farewell interview. He was going his way, and she must go hers. She felt that she should be glad when this last interview was over, be-

cause she could then tell Robert and Alice that it was so. Yes, she felt that she should be glad when it was over, and yet she was quite satisfied to walk very slowly, and to go a long way round, as if to lengthen out the interview which she was still glad should be the last. And so the mid-day sun shone over their heads, and the afternoon hours stole on, and they began at last to enter slowly upon ground well known as lying in the neighbourhood of home.

“Let us turn into the plantation walk,” said Captain Gordon, as they came near the spot; “I should like you to remember that as the place of our last parting.”

They turned into the plantation, but, as might have been expected, the ground was damp and uncertain, and the footing scarcely fit for any woman’s tread.

“This will never do,” said the Captain,

after they had proceeded a little way, “just spring upon Red Rose. I will hold you on my saddle, so that you cannot fall. Never fear, but I will keep you from all harm.”

“I am not afraid,” said Bessy, and, with a light spring, assisted by her cavalier, she was soon seated in the Captain’s saddle, while he walked close beside her, making more pretence of securing her safely with his arms than was at all necessary.

Bessy could not easily spring off again with him so near, and yet, not altogether liking her position, she blushed and laughed, and looked, for her, unusually embarrassed, and of course very beautiful. She had placed herself where she was, and she must take the consequences. So, in this strange way, with uncertain steps, and many exclamations and incoherent words, all very tender on the gentleman’s part, the two made their way slowly along the

plantation path, a place almost entirely unfrequented at that season of the year.

Very much occupied with her strange and precarious position, Bessy had still her wits so much about her as to see that they were drawing near to the end of the plantation, which was closed in by a fence and gate scarcely a hundred yards from her uncle's premises at Applegarth.

“And now,” she said, earnestly and gravely to her companion, “you must not go one step further with me.”

Captain Gordon knew what Bessy meant, and as it would answer no end of his to bring her into trouble, he reluctantly prepared to comply with her wishes. Pausing a moment to say a few parting words, he extended his arms, and lifting her carefully from the horse, placed her safely on the ground. In doing this the Captain did not perhaps release

his fair burden so soon as he might have done. It was a trying moment—the place, so still and solitary—the thought of this being the last time they would ever meet or part on earth lying heavily on the hearts of both. And yet the strictest judge would scarcely have charged it upon Bessy that *she* lingered over the parting. She rather tore herself away with flushed cheeks and palpitating heart. And so she walked straight onward, neither looking back, nor indeed looking anywhere but on the ground, until she reached the gate which opened out of the plantation.

Bessy must look up now, because the gate is always fastened on the other side, and she must stretch her arm over to reach the fastening. What does she see? Bessy starts as if a serpent had struck her outstretched hand. The gate is unfastened. Robert Gray is waiting for

her there, and he has opened the gate to let her pass through.

Beyond most women Bessy Bell had been remarkable for her courage, but it failed her now. She felt that her cheek was blanching, and the muscles of her mouth growing rigid. And she wanted to smile—to put on her old saucy defiant look, but for the life of her she could not. And then she wanted to cry—just to lay her hand upon Robert's arm, and to look up into his face, and then to hide her tears on his shoulder, as she had so often done before, and been forgiven. Why will he not let her do so now? Why is he so silent? Why does he stand aloof? Bessy cannot understand him—she has never seen him in this way before.

Bessy might well not understand that strong, deep-feeling, passionate man. We read in the daily record of our national

crimes of desperate murders done in moments such as this was to Robert Gray. There was a meaning in the terrible flash of his dark eye just then—a meaning of which death has too often been the only interpreter. Well might Bessy, though she did not understand it—well might she cower, and tremble, and try to creep away, only that he laid his powerful hand upon her arm, and grasped it with a violence which left the black mark of his fingers there for Bessy to look at on the morrow. And his voice was, if possible, more terrible than his looks—it was so deep, so broken, and yet so bitter.

“Bessy,” he said, in this strange voice, still grasping her arm, “you have made an end of everything between us now. I told you how it would be. You may go your own way. You are no more to me than any other woman, and you never will be again !”

With these words he pushed her from him, with a slight movement, which was yet sufficiently intelligible; and then, turning away, walked straight towards his own empty and desolate home.

How Bessy reached her father's house that day she would have found it difficult to describe. The habit of taking long rambling walks, and of rendering no account of where she had been, or what she had been doing, was so well known, that none of the family thought anything about her late return that day; and the less so, as she came up the hill from Applegarth, where she was accustomed to go on the slightest errand, and often with no errand at all.

She was tired, she said, on entering the house, and her mother thought her looking ill, but no further notice was taken, and, at an early hour, Bessy retired, as she said, to rest.

Instead of resting, however, she sat down to think, and her thoughts were anything but peaceful or refreshing. The shock which she had undergone had been so sudden, as well as so unexpected and strange, that it seemed, on reflection, impossible for it to be real, and the more Bessy thought it over, the less she believed in its reality. That Robert was a resolute, as well as a passionate man, she had always known, and she did not like him the less that he was so. Hitherto she had never failed to appease his anger, and to bring him round, as she was apt to call it. Why should it be more difficult to do this now? —or why should she feel more afraid of him than she had ever done before?

“It was absurd!” Bessy repeated this expression many times to herself. It was nothing less than absurd for her to feel afraid of any man, especially of one who loved her

as Robert did. And then she recalled his look—how terrible it was!—and his voice, so unlike his own, and a shiver crept over her, and she covered her face with her hands, and began to weep and sob bitterly. Perhaps this was her wisest and best resource, for her heavy weeping was followed by exhaustion, and that by sleep.

The weariness of worn-out nature kept Bessy sleeping late into the morning. Her waking was the most miserable she had ever experienced in her life. She might have been a criminal opening her eyes on the day of execution, so heavy was the load upon her spirits, which she vainly endeavoured to shake off by a system of reasoning by no means peculiar to herself—reasoning that she had intended no harm to anybody—had done nothing very bad—indeed not bad at all—was no worse than others, and so on; yet all

the while the load was there, neither lightened nor removed.

Impatient by nature, and very little accustomed to suffering of any kind, Bessy felt as if she must get rid of this in some way or other, for it was becoming perfectly intolerable, and with a strong conviction that an interview with Robert would set all things right again, she said not a word to any one at home, but hastened off, as soon as she could escape, for the purpose of seeing him alone, and, of course, bringing about a perfect reconciliation.

Robert, on his part, had been equally silent on the subject which lay nearest his heart. What could he say? What was there to tell that would not choke him in the utterance? It was no unusual thing for him to be late in reaching his father's house, where he always slept, and on this night he went up directly

to his own room, without speaking to any one, and he was away again in the morning so early as to be seen only by the men-servants going out to work. Even Alice thought nothing of this, for her brother had done the same before. She herself was occupied the whole of the forenoon, and had little idea that any thing out of the common course had been transpiring.

Robert Gray shut himself in alone that day in his empty house. It was the best way to avoid remarks, as well as to escape intrusion. Nobody thought anything of his being there, and there was no eye to take note of when he entered the house, or what he did while there. He wanted nothing but to be alone—entirely alone; and yet that unbroken silence all around began to be irksome after awhile, it made the place feel so empty, and reminded him too much of how he had been filling it of

late—filling it with pleasant voices, and heart-welcomes, and light steps passing to and fro, and the soft touch of loving hands, and the smiles and kisses of warm lips from wife and children, and all that makes the home of a true man his paradise. It grew horrible to him after awhile—that awful silence, and that dead blank, never to be filled up again with pleasant sounds or sights—never!

Robert had not many hours of solitude to endure before his ear detected the opening of the outer door, which he had neglected to secure. He could not be mistaken as to whose step it was that came softly and slowly towards the room where he was sitting stooping over the embers of a miserable fire, which he had scarcely energy enough to keep alive.

Women are very differently affected from

men under the circumstances which were about to bring Robert and Bessy together once more. Women want to talk their misery over—to bring it out into the light, and examine it bit by bit, agony by agony ; and, if nobody will pity them, to establish a plea for pitying themselves. Men want no pity for their misery. They only want to hide it, to shut it down, to bury it, and mention it no more for ever. Hence it was anything but agreeable to Robert that Bessy should steal in upon his privacy now, when she could only come to him as the ghost of all that had departed, and when there now remained between them nothing to be said, or thought, or done.

Bessy had come expressly to talk the whole matter over—to explain, to justify herself, so far as she could—to promise—to do anything but be silent ; and Robert rose up from his

seat, and confronted her with the grim aspect of one who wants neither to speak nor to hear.

Bessy looked up into his face, and a strange terror fell upon her. She had come with so much to say, and now she could not speak. Her lips quivered, and her hand—that hand which he would not take into his own now—how the fingers twitched and trembled for want of something firm to grasp.

“Robert,” she said, at length, in broken accents, “I have not been so much to blame as you think.”

“Bessy,” he said, standing erect, with his arms folded across his breast, as if to shut her forcibly out from that hiding-place now and for ever, “why do you compel me to repeat what I said yesterday? It was not said in passion. I had given you sufficient warning. I now repeat my words—‘You are no more

to me than any other woman, and you never can be again !”

“ Oh ! Robert !” cried Bessy. But her voice failed, and her heart sunk within her ; for, looking up again into his face, she read there her irrevocable doom. The steady gaze with which he regarded her was not cruel—not vindictive. It had but one meaning. It bore the unmistakable expression of a dead love.

As one would turn away who, looking for a living friend, should find the name of that friend newly inscribed upon a grave-stone, so Bessy turned away from the man who should have been her husband, and the house that should have been her home.

CHAPTER IX.

“OH! mother! mother!” was poor Bessy’s exclamation when she found that patient and ever-ready sympathiser in all the sorrows of her family. And as she said these words, Bessy threw her arms about her mother’s neck, and sobbed as if her heart was breaking.

It was the mother who was wanted now—nobody but the mother—the mother, who had been so little thought of or consulted when things went well—none else but the mother, who must be sought and found, and made the depository of all this grief and heavy trouble, its sharpest pangs, its deepest humiliation.

Mrs. Bell was astonished, bewildered, beyond all power of comprehending the cause of her daughter's distress; but it *was* distress, and that was enough for her.

"Mother," said Bessy, in broken accents, and still sobbing so that she could scarcely make herself intelligible, "it's all over between Robert and me. I want to go away somewhere—quite away—anything to get away!"

Still Mrs. Bell was unable to form any distinct idea of the real state of the case. She knew that her daughter's engagement with Robert Gray was subject to partial interruptions of its harmony, from causes which she looked upon as belonging naturally to a character and temperament like Bessy's; but as she herself had never before been made a confidant in such matters, she could not help fearing that something more serious than

usual must have occurred, and the extreme distress of Bessy's look and manner tended to confirm this opinion.

"You must tell father everything," said Bessy, as she went rambling on, sobbing and crying at intervals, with something like the pitiful wail of a lost child. "You must tell them everything, for I feel as if I could never tell anybody but you. Oh! mother! mother!" And then she hid her face upon that tender bosom where her first griefs had been wept away.

"There, there," said Mrs. Bell, clasping her daughter closely to her, and gently rocking to and fro, as if she had been still a babe—"there, there! Now don't cry so, darling!" And with her gentle hand she stroked her cheek, and parted the hair from her forehead, and showered upon it the warm kisses of one who, poor in consolation, yet

rich in love, feels that she has nothing else to give, and so must love the more.

So the poor mother sat, rocking to and fro, and holding her daughter to her heart, and murmuring soft, loving little sounds, which scarcely took the form of words; and still the great sorrow remained untold, or, rather, unexplained, for all that Bessy was able to say, and that she repeated with ever-varying tones of anguish, was, "It's all over with Robert and me!"

This kind of tumultuous and overwhelming grief was a part of Bessy's nature. The mother knew that it was, and perhaps she derived some consolation from the thought that such grief must necessarily expend itself, and be succeeded by quiet, perhaps by peace. And then the mother thought of that peace which the world can neither give nor take away. And as there was seldom much

that she could do openly or outwardly in the way of helping others, she had recourse to that which she so often did when no ear heard her, when, in fact, no words passed her lips. She lifted up her heart in fervent prayer, that this great grief of her poor child's might prove the turning-point in her spiritual experience—that in her soul's extremity, under the deep baptism of tears, she might call upon her Saviour, and be answered by the blessed words, “It is I, be not afraid !”

Such were the mother's thoughts and prayers as she still sat rocking to and fro. But the grief she had to deal with was not so easily calmed as she had hoped it would be. She herself had, perhaps, no conception of the nature of such a grief—of so terrible a shock, and so desperate a struggle under it. Instead of sobbing herself to sleep, which was the

mother's idea of the result of such a passionate outburst, Bessy only strove to gather strength to explain what had happened. It must absolutely be told, there could be no escape from that, and it must be told fairly too.

So, when Bessy had become a little more composed, both her father and grandmother were called in, to listen to as clear and circumstantial a history of what had taken place as she was capable of giving. And here it must be stated, much in her favour, that Bessy was not one of those who threw blame upon others for the sake of making their own faults appear less. No. In all such matters Bessy was an honourable girl, and, least of all, would she have allowed herself to throw blame that was undeserved upon Robert.

Neither Mr. Bell nor Margaret Gray were particularly alarmed at being called to a con-

sultation upon one of Bessy's *affairs*, as they called this in their own minds ; so frequent were the changes which passed over her feelings, that even to find her weeping bitterly produced less effect upon them than might have been expected. Only that Mr. Bell, being one of those good-natured men who cannot endure the sight of tears, would gladly have done anything to soothe and please his daughter then and there. His part was, therefore, to caress and fondle, and talk cheerfully, and try to make her smile, until Bessy almost impatiently rejected his attempts at comfort, and begged them all to sit down, and be still, while she told her tale.

It was rather a remarkable performance that telling of her tale, for whenever, from the violence of her grief, Bessy broke out into expressions of distress, the tide of family feeling, so far as her father and mother were

concerned, but especially her father, set in so strongly against Robert, that she immediately began to defend him, and said worse things of herself than she actually deserved, in order that he at least might be thoroughly justified; and then again, overcome by the contemplation of her own hard case, she wept afresh, until her father began again to say bitter things about Robert, whom he found it very difficult to forgive, simply because he had made Bessy unhappy.

But the grandmother not only forgave Robert, but wondered that he had borne with Bessy so patiently as he had done up to this time; so that now, under this last and crowning offence, she considered him fully justified in breaking with one who had held her duty towards him so lightly. Margaret Gray was not one to conceal her sentiments on any subject. The fear of man was not one of her

weaknesses, nor the fear of woman either; and she spoke out, even on this occasion, strongly, and almost bitterly, so that Bessy was put again upon defending herself; and again the tide set in against Robert, and again she had to take his part, and defend him from blame.

Thus it was that the interview went on, and was prolonged, and still ended in nothing definite, except that both parents were convinced there must be something more than a mere lover's quarrel in what had taken place, and Mr. Bell felt strongly that the case was one demanding his interference as a father. Still, it seemed to him impossible but that all should soon be amicably adjusted. Robert was passionate, he knew, but he had loved his daughter from their very childhood, and Mr. Bell had no power of conceiving a notion of any love that would not yield to penitence,

and tears, and advances towards reconciliation.

With the conviction that he must do a father's duty, however painful to himself—and Mr. Bell was not particularly fond of duty simply as such—he left his daughter with such soothing words and caresses as he was very apt at administering, and went, without delay, to seek that other interview, which he, sanguine as he was, was unable to contemplate as either easy or pleasant. It came very naturally to Mr. Bell to coax and kiss a handsome, weeping girl, who leaned affectionately on his shoulder; but to undertake a stern, deep-feeling man, with strong reasons for being offended on his side, was a very different matter, and Mr. Bell did not at all like the business lying before him.

In the meantime, Robert Gray, finding it would be absolutely necessary that the altera-

tion in his prospects should become known to his family, sent for his sister Alice to hear his version of the story, which he told from beginning to end, or, rather, described under the aspect which Bessy's conduct had worn to his view. This he did without flinching from any one particular; and if anything more than his own assurance had been wanting to convince his sister that he was really in earnest when he said that the whole affair between him and Bessy was over, it would have been found in the perfect self-possession and coolness with which he spoke the name of Captain Gordon, and described the minute particulars of the parting interview between him and Bessy, which he had witnessed, and of which he had seen more, while waiting outside the gate, than they, perhaps, had any idea of.

Indeed, the whole affair looked more to

Robert than it really was. He had set out early that morning to act upon a sudden and extremely pleasant thought, that he could afford the purchase of something for the house, which he was sure would give pleasure to Bessy ; and having pleased himself with what he had done, he sought her immediately on his return, in order to tell her the agreeable tidings. Perhaps he was the more anxious to do this because, as he was riding alone, and thinking of her, the conviction pressed upon his mind that he had not seen much of her lately, nor devoted himself to amusing and interesting her quite so much as he might have done ; and although he knew in his heart that all his hard work was for her, and scarcely a plan was laid, or an act performed, without reference to her, he had allowed himself to go working on too closely without showing her that she was ever in his

thoughts—the sole object of all contrivances, all labours, and all hope.

On this day, after Robert had executed his pleasant little scheme, and returned home at an earlier hour than he had expected, he felt as if he must find Bessy, and tell her all about it; and he was just in the mood to tell her many other things besides, perhaps often told before, but not the less agreeable for that. He had done a good day's work, as it seemed to him; he had earned his reward, and he was in haste to enjoy it by sharing the afternoon with her whose happiness was more to him than his own.

In this mood Robert had run lightly up the hill to Whinfield. Where was Bessy? Nobody knew. She had been away all the morning, they said—had gone out, perhaps, for one of her long walks, or might be spending the day at Major Inglewood's—nobody

knew. Disappointed, and a little vexed, but still light of heart, because he knew he had been doing what would give her pleasure, he was returning to his father's house, when he passed the gate leading into the plantation, and by the merest chance looked up the walk, along which he could see far away amongst the tall stems of the leafless trees. He looked inquiringly, for he was so wanting to find Bessy, that he looked for her in the most unlikely places ; and while he looked, he spied some figures in the distance, which made him wonder who could be passing along the path at that season of the year. He continued gazing until the figures came nearer, and then he could distinctly perceive who they were.

Taking into consideration the state of Robert's feelings at the time, the promise Bessy had so recently made him, and the

manner in which he relied upon that promise, more than he relied upon his own life, the effect produced upon him by what he then saw, and had time to contemplate, can scarcely be wondered at.

His sister Alice, when she heard the whole related by his lips, did not wonder at all; but her cheek grew crimson, and her eye flashed with indignation, to think that any woman should so trifle with a love like her brother's. Nor did she say one word at that time in excuse for Bessy. She could not excuse her. She did not wish her ever to be Robert's wife. So the two sat together, nursing their wrath—for they were both so differently constituted from Bessy, that it was difficult for them to find anything to palliate, and just then it seemed equally difficult to forgive.

A single glance at poor Bessy's face as it

was looking at the moment, would have brought Alice down at once from her height of indignation. But she did not see it, and she did see that noble, earnest self-denying brother, whose whole life had been devoted to her—who never had indulged a thought calculated to mar the integrity of his true allegiance—who, as he had lived, so would have died for her.

Alice knew all this, and she saw before her the whole life of this man made empty and worthless by the caprice of a selfish girl, who would not deny herself a moment's gratification for his sake. What sister would not have been indignant—bitter, unforgiving, who had loved a brother as Alice loved hers, and who now beheld that handsome manly form bent down, as if absolutely crushed—the springs of active youth suddenly dried up—the motive power of healthy manhood suddenly

stopped, the verdure and beauty of a whole lifetime suddenly withered? Who would not have been indignant, having formed such an estimate of a brother as Alice had of hers?

While the brother and sister were holding their sad converse in the dull and empty-looking house, with intervals of silence not less sad, they were startled by the sound of approaching feet. Nothing seemed so dreadful to Robert just then as to meet any of his uncle's family, and this was Mr. Bell himself, come to talk the whole matter over.

Robert and his uncle had always been what is called excellent friends, much thrown together in matters of business, and accustomed to meet on the most familiar terms. No word of unkindness had ever passed between them, but two men more entirely different in their

habits of thought and mode of feeling could scarcely have been found existing under anything like the same circumstances.

It was not easy for any one to be very serious with Mr. Bell, and as to consulting him on any delicately painful subject, that was impossible. Healthy, active, and thoroughly enjoying all that was social and comfortable in ordinary life, Mr. Bell scarcely admitted that there were really any painful subjects in the world. "Life was just as people made it," he said; "if people liked to mope, and be miserable, and make long faces, they might, but they were not forced to be miserable against their will,"—that he was always prepared to maintain.

Still, it was very certain that on this particular occasion he had left his daughter very unhappy quite against her will, and that he came now to hold conference with one who

was equally unhappy, and from the same cause. Why, then, thought Mr. Bell, should they not make matters up and have done with it, "just kiss, and be friends?" He had come in the spirit of a peace negotiator. What could be more reasonable than that they should forgive and forget?

With a most conciliatory and cheery look, Mr. Bell entered upon the business of negotiation. But there was no response, and he soon came to a stop. He could say nothing without a cordial response, and Robert stood like a rock before him, as little moved by the kind, hopeful pleading of his uncle, as the rugged cliff is moved by the rippling of the summer waves at its base.

"It is of no use, uncle," said Robert at last. "It is very kind of you, and I know you mean well to us both; but Bessy and I can never be anything more than friends again."

“Pooh! pooh!” said Mr. Bell. “Don’t talk in that way, my dear fellow. Lovers’ quarrels, you know. Let the past be past—forgive and forget!”

Robert shook his head in a manner which plainly said, “It is of no manner of use talking to me. You only waste your time. The thing is done, and all is over!”

Perhaps Mr. Bell understood that look quite as well as words, for he also began to look very grave for him, while he said,

“I don’t like to hear you talk as you do, Robert. I did not think it of you. I believed you were a good-hearted, honourable man—not one who would cast a young girl off in this way, and make her the talk of the whole neighbourhood.”

“Uncle,” said Robert, “you are speaking of what you do not understand. It is Bessy who has cast me off—not I her. I don’t

want to speak against Bessy. God forbid that I should revenge upon her the misery she has brought upon me! She has been very dear to me. Why, look you, I would have given my right hand, and gone a cripple, begging bread for the rest of my life, rather than this should have happened. But it has happened, and she has done it herself, and she knows that she has; and now it's no more use endeavouring to bring us together again, than it is the bitterest enemies! Not that we are enemies, or ever can be. I'll never speak against her. Only to you, as her father, who has a right to know, I say what I have done; and I say again that Bessy brought all this upon herself and me, and that she knew what she was doing. And even now, though I believe it is a thousand times worse to me than it is to her, I'll never speak against her—I'll bear all the blame.

So you may heap it upon me as thick as you like. Whenever anybody asks you about it, you may say what a villain I am. It can make no difference to me. Anything to clear Bessy. I would not hurt a hair of her head, nor let anybody else hurt her, if I could help it."

"Come, Robert," said Mr. Bell, holding out his hand towards him, while his eyes glistened with rising tears, "I believe you are a good-hearted lad after all. I have always found you so. I could have trusted you with all I have in the world; and as to poor Bess, I was glad enough to trust her to you, for I thought she would be safe. Come, think it over again. Why, you liked the lass ever since she was a little bairn sitting on her mother's knee. Come, Robert, let's all be friends again. Take Bessy back, and try her just this once."

“Uncle,” said Robert, placing both his hands behind him, that he might not show any disposition to accept that which was still held out to him in sign of reconciliation.

“Uncle, it can never be—never ! There has come that between Bessy and me that will never be done away with in this life. I tell you again, it is all over. Think of me as you will, I can never change in that.”

“I am very sorry—*very* !” said Mr. Bell. “I don’t know what we shall do. It won’t help the matter to think hard thoughts of you, but you *are* hard, Robert—very hard !”

“Perhaps I am, uncle ; but I can’t help it. If you were to talk to me for a year I could not change. It would only be making both you and me more unhappy, if to be more so were possible.”

“Well, Robert,” said the disappointed father, “I must say that I never could have

thought it of you. I am not angry with you, though I think I'm the only man in all England that would come and ask any one in your circumstances to forgive his daughter; but it's for the old love I've borne you as a boy. And now, if we must part so, I'm not going to spite you, nor to call you names. That would do no good to anybody. But I still say I think you very hard. And you, Alice, come, speak up for your cousin, child. Have you, that used to be like a twin lamb with her when you played together in the fields—have you never a word to say for poor Bess?"

"Oh! uncle!" said Alice, the tears streaming down her cheeks, for she deeply felt this appeal, "don't ask me to speak for Bessy, only to say I love her, and I always will. But my brother! Oh! uncle, you don't know how good, and kind, and noble he is; you don't know how his patience has been

tried, nor how very wrong poor Bessy has been."

"Well, children," said Mr. Bell, very mournfully, "I see you are both on one side. I must do for my poor bairn as best I can!"

And saying this, he held out a hand to each of them, but with his head so bowed, and his whole aspect and manner so changed, that neither brother nor sister could utter a single word, but wrung his warm true hand with an affection which nothing but tears could adequately express.

Mr. Bell left them with, perhaps, a fuller consciousness than they had had before of the reality of the blow which had fallen upon both families at once. And everything around them tended to make this reality more painfully true. In the house, with its preparations so nearly completed, there was not a chamber, a window, nor a hearthstone without its dear domestic associations, all gathered

together and embodied in that one word—*home*! Everything had been transacted so entirely with one design, that already the vacant rooms began to look like apartments in those unfinished shells of houses standing in the outskirts of towns—homes that never had a name, whose door no rightful master ever opened, from whose wide, staring windows no family ever looked out.

It would be a sad misnomer ever again to call Robert's miserable tenement a home. It was nothing but a shell. As such it might serve to hide him. He wanted nothing more now.

"And now, Alice," said Robert, after his uncle had departed, "there remains nothing else to be said on this subject, and it must never be mentioned to me. You yourself must explain to my father, and, indeed to all who busy themselves about us, just so much as is

necessary ; but no one must speak to me—no, not one word. Tell them so, will you, Alice?”

“I will,” said his sister, and with that assurance their sad interview closed. Robert remained in the house, not knowing yet what he should do with himself, or it. In the course of the day he even busied himself again about the garden, feeling it impossible to remain entirely inactive. But his work was heavy and slow, and produced but little result, simply because it was done without any definite object. And so the day wore on with him, wearily enough, so far as he was concerned ; but spring, with flowery feet, came dancing on as cheerily as ever, and the birds sang merrily overhead, and the green corn sprang up, and nature, over hill and dale, in the deep woods, and through the lanes, and high into the blue sky, sent forth her universal hymn of life and joy.

Alice was less subjected to the pain of having to speak to curious inquirers respecting her brother, in consequence of her time becoming fully occupied in a manner which removed her in some degree from social intercourse with her neighbours. A great change about this time had fallen upon Mr. Gray—to him a very heavy calamity. Ever since his illness, he had been struggling against a strange inability to manage his accounts. Alone, and unsupported, his life hitherto had been without counsel or participation, except so far as he had thrown his affairs into the hands of his lawyer ; the pressure of long-standing complications and embarrassments had been all the more severe, from the fact of their being untold, and, consequently, unshared, and especially unshared by his son. Not for any consideration would Mr. Gray have allowed Robert to be cognisant of his business trans-

actions beyond those of buying and selling at fair and market. And now, when difficulties were increasing on every hand, there was added to a long catalogue of disasters, which Mr. Gray kept, with other secrets, locked in his own impenetrable mind, the alienation of his only confidant, Mr. Spink. If, indeed, there was not still more to fear from the chance of his being turned into an enemy.

Not that Mr. Spink had ever been a confidant in the way of friendship. No bond of that kind existed, or could exist, between the two men. They had simply been available for each other's purposes—one wanting money, the other having money to lay out, and both pursuing their individual ends, with as little desire on the part of one to serve the other, as if they had been enemies instead of friends.

Mr. Spink, having become, by the death of

a relative, what is called a monied man, was anxious to be known as a landed proprietor ; and, as the legal adviser of Mr. Gray, having long been aware of his circumstances and tendencies, he had had his eye upon him and his affairs, as likely to yield, in process of time, the kind of investment he was wishing to secure. In the course of their intercourse, Mr. Spink had had his eye upon the farmer's daughter, as another likely investment ; and, without a shadow of doubt as to her willingness to meet his views, he had laid them before her in what he considered the proper time and place.

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The result, as we have seen, was not only startling to Mr. Spink, but highly offensive ; and the recollection of it was the more annoying, because, in the indignation of the moment, he had made disclosures which it would have been much wiser to keep to himself.

Hence followed angry threats to Mr. Gray, and hence the accumulation of anxieties, which had seriously affected his health both of body and mind ; for while he still persisted in saying he was as capable as ever of conducting his affairs, and wanted neither help nor interference, there were symptoms of increasing confusion and disorder in the department over which he exclusively presided, which filled his daughter with alarm.

The very spectacle of that private room of Mr. Gray's was enough, Alice thought, to confuse the clearest mind—almost to overthrow the strongest reason ; and when again she heard her father late at night opening and shutting desks and drawers, and when, on looking out into the darkness, she saw the reflection of a light from the window of that room long after all the other members of the household had retired to rest, she felt sure there must be

something going on, involving terrible risk to one who had recently been threatened, as her father had, with alarming symptoms connected with the brain.

Alice observed, also, an expression in her father's countenance which she had never seen there before. In attempting to describe it to her brother she called it a puzzled, blank kind of look; and this, in some measure, prepared her for the change already alluded to.

"Alice," said Mr. Gray one day to his daughter, "I want you to help me with some accounts I have in hand. It is little more than simply copying that I require. You will be quite equal to that."

Glad to be admitted on almost any terms to a position of usefulness to her father, Alice entered upon her new duties in that silent and passive manner which she knew was the

only way to give satisfaction. Her work, however, so far from being only that of copying, was one in which nothing but a remarkably clear head would have qualified her for being of use. Alice possessed this qualification in a high degree, and although not much practised in any system of accounts, she soon began to see her way to, at least, a little arrangement, and that was something.

Often while Alice was thus occupied, did a strong impulse to speak home to her father arrest her proceedings ; and while she looked steadily and inquiringly into his face, in order to form some estimate of how far she might venture, her heart beat fast, and her lips actually parted in the act of speech. Once or twice, indeed, she made a faint beginning, but was so immediately repelled, that her hope of renewing the experiment grew fainter every day. On one occasion, when she had gone a

little too far, her father took the papers out of her hand, and told her he had no further need for her services, and not until after two or three days of confusion and helplessness on his part was she allowed to resume her place in his room. At last Alice arrived at the conclusion that the time had not come for her to speak, and that she had better be still, and work on, in that way of duty which was really open to her, rather than attempt too earnestly what afforded little hope of success.

Once more, then, Alice was installed in her father's place of business, acting very much in the character of a confidential clerk. So long as she kept herself perfectly quiet, made no remark, gave no evidence of a disposition to pry into his secrets, did not betray any sign of understanding what she saw, she might go on to any extent. Mr. Gray wanted only a machine, and his daughter deemed it most

prudent to work on for a little while as if she was nothing more.

To Alice's observation it was becoming more and more clear that her father was no longer what he had been—that he had lost some mental power—some clearness in his calculations—perhaps in his perceptions. He made no allusion to the fact himself, in all probability would have been the last to acknowledge it. But his children knew perfectly well that nothing short of positive incapability on his part would have induced him to submit to such inspection of his private affairs, as they must now be exposed to even under his daughter's unpractised eye.

But if her eye was unpractised in such matters, it was by no means slow to observe; and having strong reason, from what Mr. Spink had betrayed, as well as from other causes, to believe that her father's foundation

in his money affairs was far from being secure, she was alive to all the facts which now came before her, and able to draw important conclusions from many seeming trifles, which would not otherwise have arrested her attention.

To no one but her brother could Alice speak freely of what she saw and feared, and many were the long consultations which she and Robert held together upon the best means of bringing their father's entanglements to a right and honourable issue. For themselves they scarcely entertained a thought, so long as the ends of justice might be fully answered. To accomplish this they talked of many plans, all formed in ignorance of the actual depth to which their father was involved.

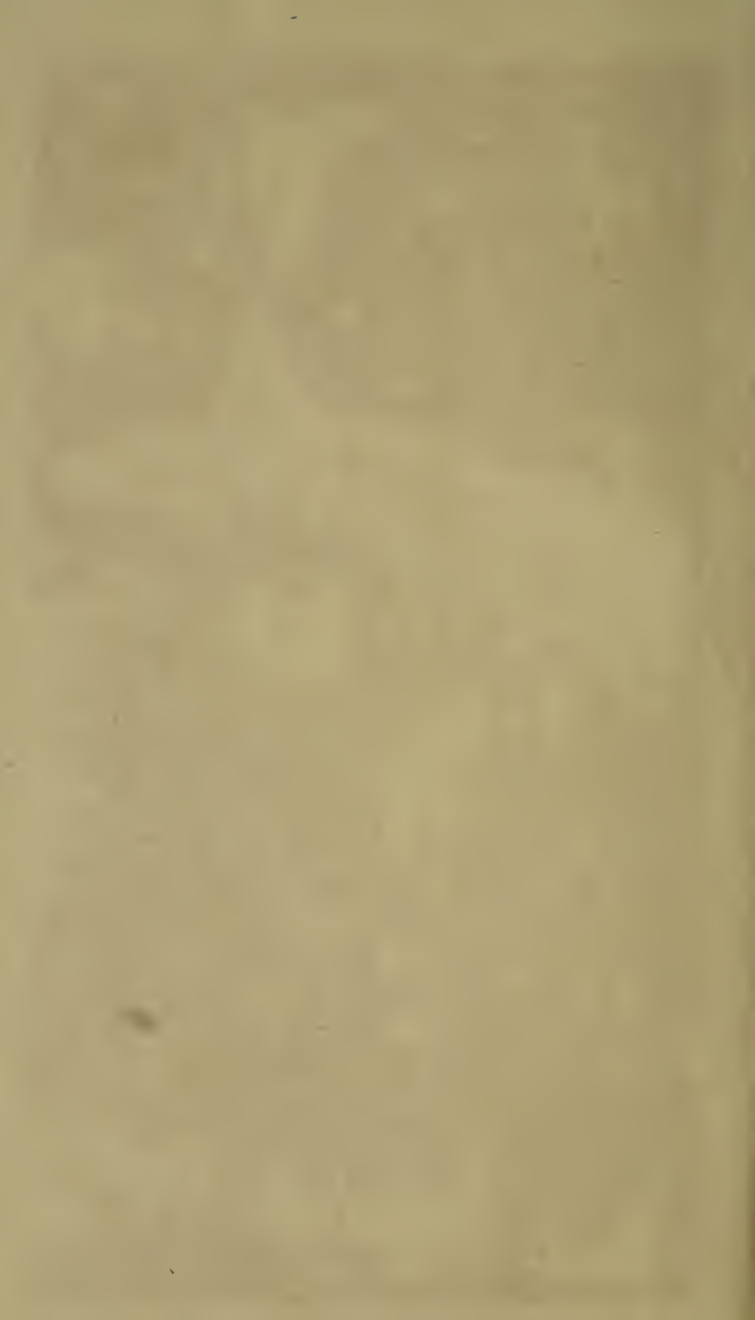
To his family as well as to the neighbourhood around, Mr. Gray had always appeared as a man of substance, if not of absolute

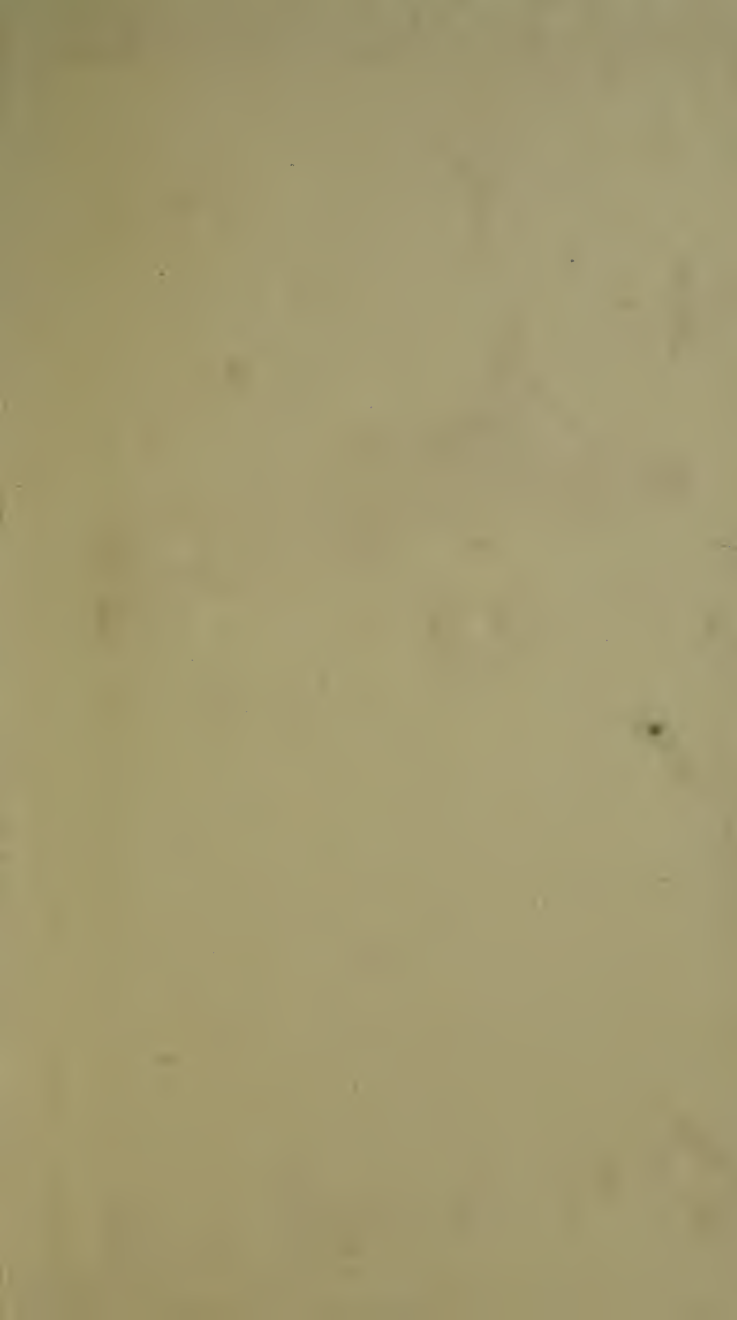
wealth—a successful farmer, and very considerable landed proprietor, than which, perhaps, there was then no prouder title extant amongst the class of people with whom he was accustomed to associate. Unless it was that in a still more select class he was the spiritual friend, and adviser, the acceptable preacher, the man mighty in prayer, and the able and influential adjuster of all points of difficulty connected with the religious denomination to which he belonged.

These two points of attainment had constituted Mr. Gray's temptations. He had reached them both, but the penalty of his successful ambition was not yet fully paid.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.







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